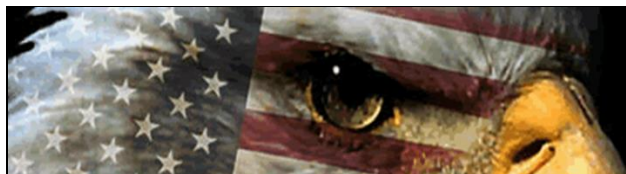



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HEADLINE	05/20 UN cuts refugee rations in Africa Sahel
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/un-cutting-refugee-rations-africas-sahel-amid-alarming-food-insecurity-2022-05-20/
GIST	GENEVA, May 20 (Reuters) - Food rations for refugees and displaced people are being cut by up to half in parts of the Sahel due to a massive funding shortfall with millions set to go hungry as prices rise and climate shocks hit yields, U.N. agencies said on Friday.

The U.N. humanitarian office (OCHA) estimates that some 18 million people face severe food insecurity in the next three months across the arid belt that stretching across Africa beneath the Sahara. Its \$3.8 billion appeal for the region is less than 12% funded, OCHA spokesperson Jens Laerke said.

"The situation has reached alarming levels in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali and Niger, where people will experience emergency levels of food insecurity during the lean season between June and August," he told a media briefing, saying that the levels of food insecurity were the worst since 2014.

In Burkina Faso, rations are currently at 75% in areas that are hard-to-reach and the most food insecure, and 50% at other sites, the World Food Programme said.

Rations have already been cut by half for displaced people and refugees in Chad, it said. The WFP will be forced to reduce them further from July if more funding is not received.

In Mauritania, the food component of the food-cash ration is being cut by 50% at Mbera camp, it said.

The conflict between major grains producers Russia and Ukraine is one factor that has driven up food prices in Africa. That crisis has also diverted aid from other areas.

"Why is it as bad now? We have conflict in the West African region, you have COVID still raging, you climate-induced shocks, you have rising costs which are all colliding to put basic needs out of reach for millions of people," Tomson Phiri from the WFP told the briefing.

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HEADLINE	05/20 New cases in locked-down Shanghai
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/shanghai-detects-new-infections-after-five-days-zero-covid-2022-05-20/
GIST	<p>SHANGHAI/BEIJING, May 20 (Reuters) - Shanghai announced its first new COVID-19 cases outside quarantined areas in five days on Friday and imposed stricter curbs in two districts, but did not signal any change to the planned end of a prolonged city-wide lockdown on June 1.</p> <p>The commercial hub of 25 million, in its seventh week of lockdown, has been slowly allowing more people to leave their homes in recent days, with many residential compounds issuing passes for brief walks or trips to the supermarket.</p> <p>But in a sign of the challenges of China's "zero COVID" policy - at odds with the resumption of normal life in the rest of the world - authorities in Shanghai's Qingpu said on Friday it had sealed off and disinfected several places and tested more than 250,000 residents after discovering three cases.</p> <p>Another district, Hongkou, on Friday afternoon ordered all shops to shut and residents to stay home until at least Sunday as it plans to carry out mass testing. It did not say why it had taken the action.</p> <p>"Our district will carry out three consecutive rounds of PCR tests for everyone," authorities in Hongkou, home to more than 750,000 people, said on its official WeChat account.</p> <p>"During this screening, all supermarkets, street-side shops must stop operations, everyone should not leave their homes."</p> <p>Earlier on Friday, other Shanghai officials said steps in the gradual re-opening of Shanghai were going ahead, with suburban parks due to open from Sunday. Other parks could open from June if they met certain conditions but leisure facilities in parks would remain closed.</p> <p>A plan to reopen four metro lines from Sunday also remained on track, the city government said.</p>

	<p>Beijing, China's capital of 22 million people, has struggled to end an outbreak since late April despite significant curbs on movement, with many residents working from home and a range of shops and venues closed.</p> <p>But its daily caseload has remained in the dozens rather than exploding like Shanghai's outbreak did. Beijing reported 62 new COVID infections for May 19, up from 55 a day earlier.</p> <p>In the capital's biggest district Chaoyang, a football pitch popular with children was chained shut, covered with coils of barbed wire and signs saying "Temporarily closed during the epidemic".</p> <p>Nearby, young couples briefly perched together beside a canal on what is one of China's unofficial Valentine's days, before security personnel approached with a loudspeaker with a message reminding people not to gather.</p>
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HEADLINE	05/20 Sri Lanka warns of food shortages
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/we-are-going-die-sri-lanka-warns-food-shortages-2022-05-20/
GIST	<p>COLOMBO, May 20 (Reuters) - Sri Lanka's prime minister has warned of a food shortage as the island nation battles a devastating economic crisis and vowed the government will buy enough fertiliser for the next planting season to boost productivity.</p> <p>A decision in April last year by President Gotabaya Rajapaksa to ban all chemical fertilisers drastically cut yields and although the government has reversed the ban, no substantial imports have yet taken place.</p> <p>"While there may not be time to obtain fertiliser for this Yala (May-August) season, steps are being taken to ensure adequate stocks for the Maha (September-March) season," Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe said in a message on Twitter late on Thursday.</p> <p>"I sincerely urge everyone to accept the gravity of the ... situation."</p> <p>Sri Lanka is facing a dire shortage of foreign exchange, fuel and medicines, and economic activity has slowed to a crawl.</p> <p>"There is no point in talking about how hard life is," said A.P.D. Sumanavathi, a 60-year-old woman selling fruit and vegetables in the Pettah market in Colombo, the commercial capital, on Friday. "I can't predict how things will be in two months, at this rate we might not even be here.</p> <p>Nearby, a long queue had formed in front of a shop selling cooking gas cylinders, the prices of which have soared.</p> <p>"Only about 200 cylinders were delivered, even though there were about 500 people," said Mohammad Shazly, a part-time chauffeur who said he was standing in the line for the third day to be able to cook food for family of five.</p> <p>"Without gas, without kerosene oil, we can't do anything," he said. "Last option what? Without food we are going to die. That will happen hundred percent."</p> <p>The central bank governor said on Thursday foreign exchange had been secured from a World Bank loan and remittances to pay for fuel and cooking gas shipments, but supplies are still to flow through.</p> <p>Inflation could rise further to a staggering 40% in the next couple of months but it was being driven largely by supply-side pressures and measures by the bank and government were already reining in demand-side inflation, the governor added.</p> <p>Inflation hit 29.8% in April with food prices up 46.6% year-on-year.</p>

As anger against the government spread, police fired tear gas and water canon to push back hundreds of student protesters in Colombo on Thursday. The protesters are demanding the ouster of the president as well as the prime minister.

Sri Lanka's economic crisis has come from the confluence of the COVID-19 pandemic battering the tourism-reliant economy, rising oil prices and populist tax cuts by the government of President Rajapaksa and his brother, Mahinda, who resigned as prime minister last week.

Wickremesinghe, appointed prime minister in his place, is accused of a being a stooge of the brothers.

Other factors have included heavily subsidised domestic prices of fuel and a decision to ban the import of chemical fertilisers, which devastated the agriculture sector.

The Group of Seven economic powers supports efforts to provide debt relief for Sri Lanka, G7 finance chiefs said on Thursday in a draft communique from a meeting in Germany after the country defaulted on its sovereign debt.

P. Nandalal Weerasinghe, the central bank chief, has said plans for a debt restructuring were almost finalised and he would be submitting a proposal to the cabinet soon.

"We are in pre-emptive default," he said. "Our position is very clear, until there is a debt restructure, we cannot repay."

A spokesperson for the International Monetary Fund said the fund was monitoring developments very closely and that a virtual mission to Sri Lanka was expected to conclude technical talks on a potential loan program to country on May 24.

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HEADLINE	05/20 Ukraine: Russian attack in east repelled
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-kyiv-prisoners-of-war-71d0dfb842caaad30b92671637c1f3b
GIST	<p>KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukrainian authorities said Friday that their troops repelled a Russian attack in the east, as Moscow struggled to gain ground in the region that is now the focus of the war even while intensifying its campaign there.</p> <p>Battered by their monthslong siege of the vital port city of Mariupol, Russian troops need time to regroup, Britain's Defense Ministry said in an assessment — but they may not get it. The city and the steelworks where Ukrainian fighters have held off the Russian assault for weeks have become a symbol of Ukraine's stoic resistance and surprising ability to stymie a much larger force.</p> <p>On Friday, a number of soldiers — just how many was unclear — were still holed up in the Azovstal plant, following the surrender of more than 1,700 soldiers in recent days. The dead from the battle are also being removed, according to Denis Prokopenko, the commander of the Azov Regiment, which is among those defending the plant.</p> <p>Speaking of the "fallen heroes," Prokopenko said: "I hope soon relatives and the whole of Ukraine will be able to bury the fighters with honors."</p> <p>With the battle for the steel plant winding down, Russia has already started pulling troops back from the site. But the British assessment indicated Russian commanders are under pressure to quickly send them elsewhere in the Donbas.</p> <p>"That means that Russia will probably redistribute their forces swiftly without adequate preparation, which risks further force attrition," the ministry said.</p>

The Donbas is now President Vladimir Putin's focus after his troops failed to take the capital in the early days of the war. Pro-Moscow separatists have fought Ukrainian forces for eight years in the region and held a considerable swath of it before Russia's Feb. 24 invasion.

But the effort to take more territory there has been slow-going. In a sign of Russia's frustration with the war, some senior commanders have been fired in recent weeks, the British Defense Ministry said.

Russian forces attacked the cities of Lysychansk and Severodonetsk, both in the Luhansk region of the Donbas, the region's governor said Friday. Twelve people were killed, and more than 60 houses were destroyed across the region, Serhiy Haidai said in a Telegram post.

But the attack on Severodonetsk was unsuccessful. Both Haidai and Ukraine's General Staff of the military said Russia took losses and retreated. Their reports could not be independently verified.

Still, Russia's struggles in the east only seemed to translate into an intensifying offensive that is inflicting increasing suffering.

"It is hell there, and that's not an exaggeration," Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said of the campaign.

"The brutal and completely senseless bombardment of Severodonetsk. Twelve dead and dozens wounded there in just one day," he said in his nightly video address Thursday night to the nation.

Meanwhile, a young Russian soldier, accused of killing a Ukrainian civilian, awaits his fate in Ukraine's first war crimes trial. Sgt. Vadim Shishimarin, a 21-year-old soldier in a Russian tank unit, has pleaded guilty, but the prosecution still presented its evidence, in line with Ukrainian law.

Shishimarin told the court Thursday that he shot 62-year-old Oleksandr Shelipov after he was ordered to — and apologized to the widow.

Ukraine's surprisingly stiff resistance has been bolstered by Western arms and funding — and more help was on the way this week.

The Group of Seven leading economies and global financial institutions agreed this week to provide more money to bolster Ukraine's public finances, bringing the total aid to \$19.8 billion, Germany's finance minister said Friday. The goal is to ensure that Ukraine's financial situation does not affect its ability to defend itself from Russia's invasion.

On Thursday, U.S. lawmakers overwhelmingly approved its own aid package of \$40 billion of military and economic assistance for Ukraine as well as its allies.

While Mariupol was a target from the start of the invasion and has been under effective Russian control for some time, a group of Ukrainian fighters have held out in the sprawling steel plant — symbolic of the way Ukrainian forces have managed to grind down the Russian troops.

While hundreds of fighters have left, in a brief video message, the deputy commander of the Azov Regiment said he and other fighters were still inside.

"An operation is underway, the details of which I will not announce," Svyatoslav Palamar said.

While Ukraine has expressed hope for a prisoner exchange for those who have surrendered, Russian authorities have threatened to possibly try for war crimes some of the Azovstal fighters.

The far-right origins of the Azov Regiment have been seized on by the Kremlin as part of an effort to cast Russia's invasion as a battle against Nazi influence in Ukraine.

HEADLINE	05/20 Stifling heat to bring summer to Northeast
SOURCE	https://www.accuweather.com/en/weather-forecasts/surge-of-heat-to-bring-hottest-weather-since-last-summer-to-northeast/1189293
GIST	<p>High temperatures ranging from the upper 80s to the mid-90s are on the way for close to 100 million people in the Northeast this weekend as stifling heat typical of the middle of summer will be felt from Ohio to North Carolina and Maine.</p> <p>In many areas, the heat and humidity this Saturday and Sunday will bring the hottest conditions since last August, and in some locations, record highs that have stood for more than 100 years could be broken, AccuWeather meteorologists say.</p> <p>Daily record highs that have stood since the World War II and Great Depression eras will be challenged at a number of locations. At Philadelphia, temperatures could approach the record of 95 set in 1934 on Saturday. In both Raleigh, North Carolina, and Albany, New York, the daily records for Saturday, May 21, were set in 1941. The record in Raleigh is 96, while the record in New York's state capital is 91. Highs of 96 and 94 degrees are forecast for the two cities respectively. Raleigh could reach 96 as early as Friday, which would break the record of 94 set in 1938.</p> <p>In a few cases, the heat could be the most intense since the summer of 2020. The predicted high in Richmond, Virginia, on Saturday is 99. The highest temperature in Virginia's capital city during the summer of 2021 was 96 F in June and July. The last time the thermometer there had readings in the upper 90s or higher was on July 28, 2020, when the high topped out at 101.</p> <p>Temperatures are forecast to hit 92 degrees in Pittsburgh on Saturday, which would tie the daily record that dates back more than 100 years ago to 1911. A temperature of 92 degrees was recorded last on June 29 in the Steel City.</p> <p>When combined with surging humidity, strong May sunshine and other factors, AccuWeather RealFeel® Temperatures will approach dangerous levels from near to above 100 for several hours during the midday and afternoon hours on Saturday.</p> <p>Weather conditions have ranged from stormy to less than ideal in coastal areas of the mid-Atlantic during the past two weekends, but for those who have been yearning for a weekend getaway at the beach and a way to beat the heat, Friday, Saturday and Sunday could be good days to do so from North Carolina to New England.</p> <p>Predicting temperatures within a few miles of the Atlantic Ocean or its bays and estuaries can be tricky during the spring and early summer, forecasters say. The chilly water can hold temperatures back by a few to a dozen or more degrees, provided a sea breeze develops. In some cases, it can get chilly right along the beach due to the persistent winds.</p> <p>On Saturday, temperatures are likely to surge quickly during the midday hours but may fall back a bit during the afternoon, in locations where a sea or bay breeze develops. Atlantic City and New York City are among some of the population centers that could experience local cooling effects from the water later Saturday. The record of 93 set in 1996 in New York's Central Park could be challenged prior to any sea breeze. Provided winds remain out of the southwest and do not kick in from Massachusetts Bay, Boston could surge into the lower 90s on Saturday. The record is 93 set in 1921.</p> <p>Experts say those heading to the beaches this weekend should be mindful of the water temperatures, which are currently far from midsummer levels, and will also need to be mindful of the dangers of cold water shock.</p> <p>Ocean water temperatures in Northeast coastal waters are still chilly during the second half of May. Surf temperatures this week range from the icy 40s along the southern Maine coast to the cold 50s from the</p>

southern New England and New Jersey beaches to the chilly 60s from Maryland to Virginia. Water temperatures consistently in the 70s are not found until the Outer Banks of North Carolina.

Another hazard some beachgoers may face this weekend is [damage from the barrage of rough surf earlier in May](#). The same storm that brought two days of rain during the Mother's Day weekend spent the following week lingering just offshore. While the storm did not evolve into a tropical system, stiff northeasterly winds from the storm set up a chain reaction that resulted in powerful waves tearing into the sand on many beaches.

Residents in the Northeast will also need to be alert for developing thunderstorms this weekend.

"Very warm and muggy conditions are in store Saturday night, and that will set the stage for hot and humid conditions on Sunday along much of the Interstate 95 corridor, despite increasing cloudiness produced by the approaching cool front from the Midwest," AccuWeather Lead Long-Range Meteorologist Paul Pastelok said.

Temperatures may once again approach record high levels with highs forecast to be well into the 80s and 90s along much of the Interstate 95 corridor.

As that front approaches, showers and thunderstorms can occur at any time on Sunday over the Appalachians and eastern Great Lakes region.

Spotty thunderstorms may affect parts of northern New York and New England during Friday night and Saturday, but the majority of thunderstorms should hold off for the balance of the Northeast until Sunday and may not reach southeastern New England and the mid-Atlantic coast until Sunday afternoon or evening.

The storms that cut into the heat later in the weekend could become severe and bring the risks of locally strong winds, flooding downpours and hail.

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HEADLINE	05/19 US urges Taiwan: follow Ukraine playbook
SOURCE	https://www.politico.com/news/2022/05/19/deadly-serious-u-s-quietly-urging-taiwan-to-follow-ukraine-playbook-for-counteracting-china-00033792
GIST	<p>U.S. officials are pushing their Taiwanese counterparts with new urgency to look to Ukraine's success in fending off Russian forces as a blueprint for countering a Chinese attack, former and current U.S. officials tell POLITICO.</p> <p>But there is little doubt that China is also learning from Russia's botched invasion as it looks to reunify Taiwan with the mainland — with or without force. Experts say Beijing is likely adjusting its plans for the island to reflect and improve on Russia's failures.</p> <p>"There is no question that the perceived reality of the possibility [of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan] is greater than it was three months ago," said Aaron Friedberg, a professor of politics and international affairs at Princeton University. But "it's not a trivial challenge for the Chinese, even as strong as they've become."</p> <p>Discussions about reshaping Taiwan's military are intensifying as President Joe Biden heads out this week on his first trip as president to Asia. He will make stops in South Korea and Japan, where he will meet with the leaders of the other nations in the Quad security pact: Japan, India and Australia.</p> <p>While Biden is not visiting Taiwan — the most likely flashpoint of a conflict — the China problem looms over the trip. The U.S. and its Pacific allies have been alarmed by Beijing's tacit support for Moscow since the invasion, and U.S. officials believe the conflict has influenced China's calculations about how and when to attempt to take control of Taiwan.</p>

“Clearly the Chinese leadership is trying to look carefully about the lessons they should draw from Ukraine about their own ambitions in Taiwan,” CIA Director Bill Burns said this month. “I don’t think for a minute it’s eroded [President Xi Jinping’s] determination over time to gain control over Taiwan, but I think it’s something that’s affecting their calculation about how and when they go about doing that.”

While the United States does not formally have diplomatic relations with Taiwan, the two governments maintain tight security ties under the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act. Washington has long supported Taipei’s self-defense capability with arms sales and a close military relationship — the two forces train together and Taiwanese cadets study at elite U.S. military academies.

Russia’s Feb. 24 invasion of Ukraine was a wakeup call for the Taiwanese people. Recent opinion polls show a significant increase in citizens who believe a Chinese invasion is likely, compared with surveys taken before the invasion. There is also more support for strengthening Taiwan’s self-defense, Hsiao Bi-khim, Taiwan’s official representative to the United States, told POLITICO in an interview Tuesday.

“We in no way want to see that same type of pain and suffering replicated in Taiwan,” she said. “The government as well as the public has to invest our efforts in our self-defense or preparedness. And I think there is a general acknowledgement that this is a priority right now.”

At the same time, the U.S. effort to reshape Taiwan’s military has taken on new urgency since the Russian invasion, officials and experts said. U.S. officials are pointing to Ukraine’s success with Stinger anti-aircraft and Javelin anti-tank missiles, as well as its spirited corps of civilian volunteers, as proof that the strategy they have long endorsed works.

“The Ukraine situation validated some long-standing steps we’ve been taking in Taiwan,” said one DoD official, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss a sensitive topic.

Top U.S. military officials have said in recent weeks that Taipei is learning critical lessons from Russia’s invasion of Ukraine that the island could apply to a Chinese attack. Lt. Gen. Scott Berrier, director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, noted in a recent hearing the importance of small unit tactics, a noncommissioned officer corps, and effective training “with the right weapons systems.”

“I think they’re learning some very interesting lessons from the Ukrainian conflict, like how important leadership is,” Berrier said.

The Pentagon and State Department declined to comment for this article.

‘Asymmetric’ weapons

Since 2010, Taipei has spent more than \$23 billion on U.S. weapons, primarily large, conventional arms such as F-16 fighter jets and M109A6 self-propelled howitzers. But in recent years Washington has been urging Taipei to buy different types of weapons geared for so-called asymmetric warfare — smaller, more mobile ones that are difficult for a larger foe to target and counter.

On the heels of Russia’s invasion, the State Department in a March letter rebuffed Taipei’s request to purchase MH-60R Seahawk helicopters, designed for hunting submarines — a move experts said U.S. officials would not have made before the Ukraine invasion.

Similarly, the U.S. Army in a separate March letter urged Taiwan to buy an upgraded version of the howitzer Taipei had requested years ago. Meanwhile, officials plan to refuse any request for the E-2D Advanced Hawkeye early warning and battle management aircraft, former and current officials said.

Instead of these weapons, the U.S. believes Taiwan should invest in more mobile, cost-effective systems such as Stingers and Javelins, as well as sea mines and coastal anti-ship missiles.

“We are leaning on them in a way that we’ve not done in the past, in a way in fact that we’ve gone out of our way not to do,” Friedberg said. “The decision [to] turn down the Taiwanese request for the MH-60 helicopters, what that says to me is that OK, we are really deadly serious about this.”

These moves appear to reflect a shift in policy by the Biden administration. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Mira Resnick and her colleagues briefed the U.S.-Taiwan Business Council in March that the administration would no longer support arms sales for Taiwan “outside their definition of ‘asymmetric’ defense,” according to a Tuesday press release from the council.

The council noted in the release that the administration “appears to have canceled” the Seahawks , Hawkeyes and M109 mobile artillery “for not meeting their ‘asymmetric’ criteria.”

The council pushed back on the new policy, noting in a Monday letter to Resnick that “far from accelerating Taiwan’s deterrent capabilities, we fear that the envisaged “asymmetric” focus for Taiwan security assistance will result in policy confusion and a substantial slowing of overall arms sales.”

In particular, the council expressed concern that the asymmetric policy focuses too much on a “D-day scenario,” leaving China free to continue its “gray-zone” operations — those short of all-out war, for instance flight intercepts and disinformation.

USTBC President Rupert Hammond-Chambers also pointed to America’s longstanding policy of “strategic ambiguity” about whether and how the U.S. would come to Taiwan’s aid in the event of an invasion, according to the release.

If the Biden administration “intends to dictate specific arms sales to Taiwan,” Hammond-Chambers urged some “clarity on when and where the U.S. would be willing to step in and fill the new gaps.”

Culture shift

Taiwan’s military may need a culture shift, as well as new weapons. Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said in an April hearing that an important lesson Taiwan could draw from Ukraine is “a nation in arms.”

“If your opponent tries to invade you, and every military age man [and] woman is armed, and they have a little bit of training, that can be a very effective use,” Milley said.

Behind the scenes, U.S. officials are urging Taipei to modernize its reserve institution and lay the groundwork for mobilizing the population in the event of an invasion, officials said.

Taiwan late last year established an All-Out Defense Mobilization Agency, which is responsible for the mustering of reservists during wartime as well as disaster relief. The agency is drafting an “all-out defense handbook” that will increase the public’s knowledge of military response efforts for wartime and peacetime emergencies, officials said at the time.

But Taiwan’s military is not well integrated with its civilian population, a disconnect that has roots in Taiwan’s long history of martial law. Many citizens still have physical and mental scars from Taiwan’s period of “White Terror,” when those believed to be anti-government were rounded up and imprisoned — thousands were executed.

Over the past few decades, Taiwan has gradually reduced its military service requirement from two years to just four months, said Bonnie Glaser, an East Asia analyst at the German Marshall Fund of the United States. She noted that “it is not considered to be really serious” and that some Taiwanese refer to it as “summer camp.” The problem is compounded by the fact that the active-duty military is not keen to work with the reserve force, which is seen as insufficiently trained, she added.

Taiwan's defense ministry is assessing whether the four-month requirement is adequate, particularly as there appears to be a high degree of public support for extending the mandatory training, Hsiao said. But the change won't happen overnight.

Taiwan's reserve force, meanwhile, is large but limited in capability, Glaser said.

"These people get called up for something like two days a year, so it's not a serious reserve force," she said.

Taiwan officials have had extensive communications with their American counterparts on ways to revamp the reserves system, Hsiao said. Officials recently began more intensive reserve training, she said, the timing of which coincided with the beginning of the Ukraine conflict.

The Pentagon is also urging Taiwan to increase cooperation between the military and civilian institutions, particularly with regard to protecting critical infrastructure, officials said. The department has also encouraged the Taiwanese military to consider introducing a civilian territorial defense force, but has not gotten much traction, Glaser said.

"Part of the problem in Taiwan is there really isn't much enthusiasm among the civilians to work with the military or the military to work with civilians," she said.

"That said, I think the Pentagon would really like Taiwan to draw some lessons from Ukraine, as everyone has seen that putting up resistance can be one of the most decisive factors in wartime."

A 'problematic' analogy?

But some analysts believe using Ukraine as a model for Taiwan is the wrong approach. Randall Schriver, who served as the Pentagon's top Asia policy official in the Trump administration, noted that Ukraine may have thwarted a swift Russian victory — but at the cost of tens of thousands of lives and millions of people displaced.

"If you tell Taiwan, 'this is the plan for you,' that's not very comforting," Schriver said.

The Ukraine analogy is also "problematic" because of Taiwan's geography — the Chinese must cross 100 miles of ocean to get to the island, whereas Russia and Ukraine share a 1,200-mile land border, Schriver noted. Any Chinese invasion would be visible from miles away and vulnerable to standoff weapons. On the other side, resupply — an issue crucial to Ukraine's defense — would be much more difficult in the case of Taiwan, a weakness Beijing may seek to exploit with an air and sea blockade.

The diplomatic situation also poses a challenge: Many countries, including the United States, do not recognize Taiwan's independence from China, while Ukraine is internationally recognized as a sovereign nation, he added.

"There is no guarantee that the international community rallies around Taiwan the way it did Ukraine because of the non-diplomatic status," he said.

Some analysts worry that, while a mobilized and trained civilian defense force might be useful, the goal should be deterring an attack in the first place. Dan Blumenthal, senior fellow and director of Asian Studies at the American Enterprise Institute, noted that Taiwan needs tools now to deal with near daily Chinese air incursions and other types of military intimidation around the island. Some factions in Taipei believe aircraft such as F-16s, MH-60Rs and E-2Ds are key to solving this problem.

"Taiwan's political and military leadership need a number of things to deter, including being able to counter the daily coercive and intimidating threats that they face," Blumenthal said. "They can't just sit back and wait for an invasion."

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin himself advised lawmakers in April not to make “direct comparisons” between Ukraine and Taiwan.

“These are two completely different scenarios, two different theaters,” Austin said during an April 5 hearing.

The economic toolbox

There’s also increased thinking in U.S. government and analytical circles about the non-military dimensions of a Chinese attack on Taiwan — including using sanctions to deter Beijing, or at least punish it.

Last summer, well before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Eric Sayers of the American Enterprise Institute attended an informal meeting of about 15 former U.S. government officials, analysts and congressional staffers interested in Taiwan policy and sanctions and export control measures.

The goal of the Washington gathering was to brainstorm ways to sharpen the economic tools the United States and allies could use to prevent a Chinese attack. The idea was to “basically do the homework now so we have it ready to go later,” Sayers said.

Congress may need to pass legislation — similar to the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act, which targeted Iran, North Korea and Russia — spelling out the sanctions China would face if it were to initiate a conflict, Sayers said. “Congress can play a bad cop role and initiate that,” he said.

That could prove one of the trickiest efforts of all. The United States is far more economically entangled with China than it was with Russia, although there have been efforts in recent years to reduce that dependency.

But at the same time, the Russian invasion raised questions about the efficacy of sanctions, Friedberg said, noting that the threat of sanctions “didn’t deter the Russians from doing what they did in Ukraine.”

“There is a question of whether we’d be willing to do the same thing with China, because the cost to us would be much greater,” he said.

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HEADLINE	05/20 China launches South Sea drills
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/biden-japan-asia-beijing-south-korea-44fc6437b9fcd3d3c39d704a64c61c1f
GIST	<p>BEIJING (AP) — China is holding military exercises in the disputed South China Sea coinciding with U.S. President Joe Biden’s visits to South Korea and Japan that are largely focused on countering the perceived threat from Beijing.</p> <p>China’s Maritime Safety Administration office in the southern island province of Hainan said the drills began Thursday and will continue through Monday.</p> <p>It said other aircraft and vessels will be prohibited from entering the area but gave no further details. China claims the South China Sea virtually in its entirety and the crucial waterway has become a potential flashpoint for conflict in Asia.</p> <p>The U.S. does not take a position on the sovereignty issue but insists on the right to operate freely in the sea and frequently sails warships close to militarized Chinese-held islands in the area in what are termed freedom of navigation operations.</p>

China routinely protests such missions, labeling them deliberate provocations that endanger peace and stability. To assert its claim, it has built airstrips and other military infrastructure atop human-made islands built on coral reefs and atolls.

Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Taiwan also exercise overlapping claims in the South China Sea. The Philippine coast guard said Friday it had established outposts on three islands in the contested waters, a move that will likely be frowned upon by Beijing.

Since the beginning of the month, China's first aircraft carrier, the Liaoning, has been conducting a mission in the Sea of Japan. The Defense Ministry described it as "routine training" aimed at boosting performance that is "in line with relevant international law and international practice, and not targeting any party."

China also flew a pair of long-range nuclear-capable H-6 bombers through the area on Wednesday, Chinese media reports said.

Meanwhile Friday, the aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan and its strike group left their home port at Yokosuka, Japan, for a "routine at-sea period," the 7th Fleet said.

The ships and the carrier air wing "are expected to work with allies and partners, promote adherence to a rules-based international order, as well as maintain presence and flexibility to meet the needs of the U.S. Department of Defense," the Navy said.

While in Japan, Biden will meet Tuesday with fellow leaders of the Indo-Pacific strategic alliance known as the Quad, a group that includes Australia, India and Japan.

The four nations share concerns over China's growing regional assertiveness and increasingly capable armed forces.

China views the grouping as a part of a U.S.-led push to impede its economic and political rise and frustrate its attempts to intimidate self-governing Taiwan into accepting its demand to unify with the mainland.

On Wednesday, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi criticized what he called negative moves by Washington and Tokyo against Beijing during a video call with Japanese Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi.

"What arouses attention and vigilance is the fact that, even before the American leader has set out for the meeting, the so-called joint Japan-U.S. anti-China rhetoric is already kicking up dust," Wang said, according to China's Foreign Ministry.

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HEADLINE	05/19 Experts: gas \$6/gal by end summer
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/gas-could-rise-above-6-per-gallon-by-end-of-summer-experts
GIST	<p>Come August, drivers across the nation could spend more than \$6 per gallon of gas to fill up their vehicles.</p> <p>Due to unresolved problems with the fuel supply chain and an expected increase in summer traveling, JPMorgan Chase analysts predict another surge in gas prices this summer.</p> <p>"There is a real risk the price could reach \$6+ a gallon by August," said Natasha Kaneva, head of global oil and commodities research at JPMorgan Chase. "U.S. retail price could surge another 37% by August."</p> <p>With each additional \$1 increase in gas prices, JPMorgan Chase estimates that Americans' consumer habits will drop by 60 cents.</p>

"The hit from higher gas prices is twofold for high-gas-consuming states. Not only do higher prices reduce real income by more than elsewhere, such states appear to be less able to offset higher prices by reducing real demand," said Peter McCrory, U.S. economist at J.P. Morgan Research.

As of Thursday morning, the [average price](#) of a gallon of regular gas had reached \$4.59, while a gallon of premium gas had reached \$5.20 — more than a \$1.50 increase from last year at this time.

On Wednesday, drivers nationwide saw the [highest gas prices](#) the country has ever recorded, surpassing \$4 per gallon in all 50 states and [Washington, D.C.](#), for the first time.

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HEADLINE	05/20 AAA: record gas prices 'unprecedented'
SOURCE	https://www.foxbusiness.com/energy/record-gas-prices-for-this-long-unprecedented-aaa
GIST	<p>Gas prices have been hitting fresh records for the past 11 consecutive days amid the energy supply crunch in the U.S., according to the American Automobile Association (AAA), which noted that the stretch of record-high prices as the pump is "unprecedented."</p> <p>Speaking with Fox News Digital, Andrew Gross, the national spokesman for AAA Inc. revealed that drivers should expect elevated prices throughout the summer, especially if the war in Ukraine rages on.</p> <p>The national average for a gallon of gas was \$4.59 on Friday, a slight increase from the day before and a new record high.</p> <p>Thursday's record was 16 cents higher than the week before, nearly 50 cents higher than the month before and \$1.55 more compared to the same time last year.</p> <p>All 50 states had a national retail price over \$4 a gallon on Thursday, according to AAA, with Oklahoma offering the cheapest gas at \$4.03 a gallon and California offering the most expensive gas with an average of \$6.06.</p> <p>Tighter supply and increased demand have pushed gas prices higher, according to the association.</p> <p>"Demand is up," Gross told Fox News Digital as he explained what is contributing to the elevated prices. "Typically this time of year we are in a little bit of a lull. There is often a demand lull between spring break and Memorial Day and we had a little bit of it about two weeks ago, but then last week, ... there was actually an increase, which is very unusual. I don't think I've ever seen that."</p> <p>"You have this increased demand as well as these really elevated oil prices," he added, pointing out that "the price of oil has been stuck in this weird range of \$100 a barrel to \$110 a barrel."</p> <p>"It meets resistance when it hits \$110 and then it drops back down, but then it meets resistance to drop below \$100 and so it's in this uncomfortably high area," Gross continued.</p> <p>Oil prices fell on Friday as investors worried that slowing global economic growth and tighter central bank monetary policy could impact the recovery in fuel demand.</p> <p>Brent futures for July fell 59 cents to \$111.45 a barrel Friday morning, while benchmark U.S. crude for June fell 56 cents to \$111.65 on its last day as the front-month.</p> <p>Oil prices peaked above \$130 per barrel in March due to anxiety about the disruption of supplies from Russia, the world's No. 2 exporter.</p> <p>"To put it in perspective, back in August, a barrel of oil was about \$64 so we're \$40 plus more and that's putting a lot of upward pressure because oil accounts for about 60% of the cost of what you pay at the pump, so the more expensive the oil, the more expensive the gasoline," Gross noted.</p>

AAA said that the volatile crude prices coupled with the supply/demand dynamic will likely continue to keep upward pressure on gas prices.

"The oil market is a lot like the stock market and we've seen the stock market all over the place," Gross said.

"It is crazy and the oil market operates the same way," he added, pointing to the [wild swings in markets recently](#). "It's so volatile right now and it's very headline driven. It doesn't take much to spook the oil market."

He noted that "a lot of the downward pressure recently in the oil market was due to COVID and all these fears in China about China locking down because any kind of economic slowdown in China really effects oil because China is really the world's largest consumer of oil."

"So if they start consuming less, that's more oil for everybody else," Gross continued.

Officials have stuck to a "zero-COVID" approach in China, but as the number of new cases plummets, authorities have been relaxing restrictions, however, in a slow and deliberate manner.

On Thursday officials announced the locked-down Chinese metropolis of Shanghai will reopen four of its 20 subway lines and dozens of bus lines this weekend as the region slowly eases pandemic restrictions that have been in effect for more than six weeks.

Fox News contributor and The King's College business and economics professor Brian Brenberg argues the Biden administration is making it hard to produce U.S. oil.

Gross also pointed to the Russian invasion of Ukraine as "the prime generator for all these upward prices because the war has just injected all this weird volatility into the market."

He explained that "there's going to be a lot less Russian oil coming into the global market" as a result of the war and stressed that Russian oil "is hard to replace" given the country is a major producer of the commodity.

The record gas prices come as the European Union [edges toward](#) oil sanctions on Russia amid the Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine. It also comes amid record-high inflation, with the consumer price index reaching [8.3% in April](#), hovering near March's 40-year high.

The European Commission, the EU's executive branch, proposed on May 4 a sixth package of war sanctions that included a ban on oil imports from Russia. The commission's president noted that securing the agreement of all "will not be easy."

On Monday, a small group of countries continued to oppose the ban on Russian oil imports.

The White House has blamed Russian President Vladimir Putin for the record-high gas prices in the U.S., even coining the surge as the "#PutinPriceHike" and vowing that President Biden will do everything he can to shield Americans from "pain at the pump."

Biden, last month, announced that the [Environmental Protection Agency](#) will allow the sale of E15 gasoline – gasoline that uses a 15% ethanol blend – across the country this summer. Biden has also moved to release 1 million barrels of oil per day from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve for the next 6 months. The president is also calling on Congress to make companies pay fees on idled oil wells and non-producing acres of federal lands, aiming to incentivize new production.

Gross noted that administration's moves will help "a little bit."

"Driving habits haven't seemed to change so that's something to keep your eye on over the next few weeks and months," he added. "With these higher prices, at what point will people decide I'm going to stay home or I'm going to ride a bike."

"It's really an interesting time right now," he stressed.

"I think a lot of people are probably looking at electric vehicles a lot more seriously now," Gross added.

He also noted that Memorial Day weekend will still attract millions of drivers despite the higher gas prices.

AAA predicts [39.2 million people](#) will travel 50 miles or more from home over the holiday weekend, which is an increase of 8.3% from 2021, but is still below pre-pandemic levels in 2019 when 42.8 million people traveled by car.

Gross explained that the high cost of gas is likely "pricing some travelers out."

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HEADLINE	05/19 SEA airport summer travel tips
SOURCE	https://www.portseattle.org/news/tips-sea-airport-summer-travel-season-begins-memorial-day
GIST	<p>For many travelers, the wait is over and it's time to get away with a trip through the airport. With that in mind, travelers are asked to arrive early and be patient through Seattle-Tacoma International Airport (SEA).</p> <p>Memorial Day holiday travel will see a surge in numbers, with about one-third more than in 2020, while a squeeze in pandemic effects requires some advanced planning for a smooth experience.</p> <p>More travelers continue to use their own vehicles to arrive at the airport, so parking will be a continuous challenge. Alternate ways to get to SEA is encouraged such as using rideshares, Link light rail, and public transit. Just like other areas in the region, once inside the airport, staffing challenges are affecting services from checkpoints to concessions, and airlines. Please factor in more time to avoid tight squeezes to get to your flight. Better early, than late!</p> <p>The surge and the squeeze</p> <p>Memorial Day holiday traveler numbers are expected to be one-third higher than in 2021, that's about 80% of pre-pandemic numbers from 2019. The busiest days to travel are Thursdays and Fridays as well as Sundays and Mondays. The busiest times at the TSA security checkpoints at SEA are 5 a.m. to 10 a.m., 2 p.m. to 5 p.m., and 9 p.m. to 11 p.m.</p> <p>The busiest days are expected to be Friday, May 20, with just over 150,000 passengers traveling through the airport (departing, arriving and connecting). The Friday before the holiday, May 27, projects a drop-off to 137,000 passengers, followed by Thursday, May 26, at 134,000 passengers. That's close to the busiest days we've seen since the pandemic back in August of last year. Pre-pandemic passenger numbers reached as high as 178,000 per day during Memorial Day in 2019. SEA forecasts passenger numbers for the year will be about 6% below 2019 levels with near full recovery in 2023 at about 1% less than 2019.</p> <p>It may have been a while since your last flight, but do not underestimate how long your experience may take during peak travel periods. Travelers can find stress-free ways to skip the line and make their trip more predictable.</p> <p>What's the best advice for travelers?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Get here early! Depending on your needs, you may need more time. Make sure you're at the airport at least two hours before your boarding time for a domestic flight and three hours before an international flight.

- **Masks are no longer required at the airport, however, the CDC recommends wearing a mask during travel.** Check your destination's [COVID-19 requirements](#) for entry, if needed [XpresCheck has testing available](#) on the baggage claim level.
- **The SEA Airport parking garage continues to be busy.** Think of alternate modes of travel to get to the airport or arrive an extra 45 minutes earlier to find a place to park.
- Use [SEA Spot Saver](#) to reserve your spot in the TSA line and avoid congested security lines at the airport.
- Download (or update!) the [flySEA App](#) for live checkpoint wait times. As a bonus, it also is a one-stop resource for traveler alerts, parking spot tracker, maps, and more info.
- [Use Order SEA](#), our mobile ordering service, including gate delivery for food from all over the airport or pick up so you can grab and go to your gate.

Airport parking will be a challenge

Why is parking so congested? Demand is up and supply is down. More customers are driving private vehicles than choosing ride share or public transit. Pandemic-related closures reduced the number of parking stalls in the area outside the airport while a garage improvement project and a recent fire has led to temporary reductions at the SEA garage. Shuttle bus driver shortages also continue to impact the availability of off-site parking options for airport employees.

Safety first, avoid shoulder parking

Vehicles are encouraged to use the new [reconfigured cellphone lot](#) and avoid dangerous parking along the shoulder of the airport drives. Violators will be cited as the Port of Seattle Police are working with the Washington State Patrol for emphasis patrols during the holiday.

Alternate ways to get to SEA Airport

- Avoid the hassles of driving with [Sound Transit's Link light rail](#). Public transit is by far the best option if you want to stay out of a traffic jam.
- Catch a ride with taxis or [app-based rideshares](#) like Uber and Lyft, or other modes of [ground transportation](#).
- [Rent your own ride](#). All rental car companies operate at an off-site rental car facility where dedicated shuttle buses transport passengers for free 24-hours-a-day, 365 days a year.
- [Pedal power!](#) Yes, you can even bicycle to the airport with bike racks and two ways to access the airport on a bike. If you still plan to park, expect 45-60 minutes to find a stall
- Off-site parking facilities are also expected to be very busy or already full.
- If you're picking up or dropping off loved ones:
- Check out the new and improved [Cell Phone Lot](#)! The new access ramp is a game-changer with better flow for entry and exiting you can pick up your passengers easier. Use it instead of shoulder parking, which is dangerous and illegal!
- [Travel hack!](#) Use the Departures Drive for pickup at night and the Arrivals Drive for passenger drop-off in the morning.

Give me the traveler basics

1. The [CDC guidance for travelers](#) changes depending on your COVID-19 vaccination status. Check with your airline for the state or country where you plan to travel.
2. **Be ready for security checkpoints.** SEA and TSA want to help you move through [security checkpoints](#) as quickly as possible. Travelers are required to remove electronics larger than a cell phone from carry-on luggage. Also, remove foods and liquids from your carry-on luggage, prepare to hold up your boarding pass for review, and wear your mask. You can also see the latest [Identification and Documentation Requirements](#).
3. **Need more travel hacks?** Our [Customer Care team](#) has the best advice to navigate SEA like a frequent flier.
4. SEA is adding new services to make travel more accessible and improve the travel experience beyond the Americans with Disabilities Act requirements. Check out our [SEA Social Story](#) developed for traveler with sensory sensitivities such as autism, but also great overall tips for kids. Learn more about [accessibility at SEA](#). The interactive map on the flySEA App offers accessible route directions.

	5. Check with the City of SeaTac to see if there are any road construction projects that might hinder your access to the airport.
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HEADLINE	05/19 Tajikistan security forces kill 25 protesters
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/may/19/twenty-five-ethnic-pamiris-killed-by-security-forces-gorno-badakhshan-tajikistan-protests
GIST	<p>At least 25 people were killed on Wednesday by security forces in Tajikistan during a protest in the autonomous region of Gorno-Badakhshan (GBAO), where the Tajik regime has targeted the Pamiri ethnic minority.</p> <p>The deaths mark an escalation of violence in the region. Conflict between the central government and the Pamiri has continued for decades, with the cultural and linguistic minority ethnic group suffering human rights abuses, as well as discrimination over jobs and housing.</p> <p>The Pamir region has been the only place in Tajikistan where anti-government protesters still take to the streets, despite the authoritarian pro-Kremlin regime.</p> <p>According to witnesses, several hundred residents of Khorog, the capital of GBAO, gathered at the weekend to call for the dismissal of the governor and the release of demonstrators arrested for participation in a protest in November, when three men were killed and 17 wounded by security forces.</p> <p>Protests continued until Wednesday when, as people marched to the main square in Khorog, security forces blocked the road and allegedly started firing rubber bullets, stun grenades and teargas at the protesters, killing at least 25 people.</p> <p>The Tajik government claimed “members of an organised criminal group” had blocked the highway “in order to destabilise the social and political situation”.</p> <p>In a statement on the state news agency, Khovar, the interior ministry said: “Law enforcement agencies have begun an anti-terror operation ... in a restive region that borders Afghanistan and China and has long been a flashpoint of tensions.”</p> <p>The Tajik authorities claimed that arms and support from foreign “terrorist organisations” were coming in to the Pamiri region.</p> <p>“The organised criminal groups did not comply with the lawful demands of law-enforcement officers to hand over their weapons and ammunition, and put up armed resistance,” the interior ministry said.</p> <p>But activists said their protests had been peaceful. “The government is branding and naming the peaceful protesters as ‘terrorists’, which is a complete fake, and then using that as an excuse to shoot at them,” said one Pamiri activist who cannot be named for security reasons.</p> <p>During the Tajikistan civil war from 1992 to 1997, thousands of Pamiris were killed in what some human rights activists have described as “ethnic cleansing”.</p> <p>In 2012, during clashes seen by many in GBAO as an attempt by the Tajik government to bring the autonomous region under its full control, at least 40 civilians were killed.</p> <p>In February, parents of men killed by Tajik forces during a protest in November called on the international community to step in and protect ethnic minority groups.</p> <p>Families have demanded that the soldiers responsible for killing their sons be brought to justice and urged the United Nations to intervene.</p>

Tajikistan's president of 28 years, Emomali Rahmon, who met the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, on Monday, is seen by the Pamiri as wanting to take control of Gorno-Badakhshan.

Neil Clarke, head of the legal programme at Minority Rights Group International, told the Guardian: "The deteriorating human rights situation in the region is leaving the population, who are mainly Indigenous peoples and ethnic and linguistic minorities, at serious risk of harm.

"We now believe that without urgent measures, the situation could escalate towards increasing conflict," he said. "The widespread harassment of the population of GBAO by authorities including the police, security and military personnel appears increasingly systematic. These include wide-ranging forms of surveillance and invasions of privacy, arbitrary detention and the use of coercion to obtain signatures and/or public statements against the will of the individual."

Since November security checkpoints have been reinforced, and hundreds of people who took part in the demonstrations have been arrested or banned from leaving the region. Clarke said the latest deaths marked renewed efforts to suppress the Pamiri.

"Authorities have reinstated a blockade on internet connection in the region and have again begun to arrest and detain prominent civil society leaders and independent individuals under the alleged pretext of an 'anti-terror operation'," he said.

"Pamiri people are not the terrorists. We are calling for urgent measures by Tajikistan authorities to de-escalate the developing conflict, by restoring and ensuring the respect for human rights in GBAO and most urgently call on authorities to release the activist Ulfatkhonim Mamadshoeva and others who have been detained and interrogated by security forces, without due process, as part of efforts to silence the voice of Pamiri activists."

Since [crackdowns on opposition groups in 2014](#) in Tajikistan, it is thought that 15 activists who left the country have disappeared in Russia or Turkey.

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HEADLINE	05/19 Belgorod, Russian city on Ukraine frontline
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/19/belgorod-the-russian-city-on-the-ukraine-frontline
GIST	<p>The sounds of war have become louder in Belgorod, a mid-sized Russian city about 25 miles (40km) from the Ukrainian border. And the blasts are more frequent.</p> <p>"On Sunday, we were woken up again by explosions. You never know if it's them or us firing," said Vladimir, a shopkeeper in the city.</p> <p>Locals such as Vladimir first witnessed Russia's military buildup at the start of the year, when thousands of troops amassed near Belgorod before Moscow's attack in late February.</p> <p>"When the conflict started, we would hear rockets being launched into Ukraine. But now we get hit too. It is a different sound."</p> <p>As the war has dragged on and Russia failed in its objective to quickly seize Kyiv, officials in Belgorod and other border cities have in recent weeks reported a series of attacks by Ukrainian forces.</p> <p>Ukraine has not directly accepted responsibility but has described the incidents as payback and "karma" for Russia, almost three months after it invaded its neighbour.</p> <p>The apparent Ukrainian attacks, which started when two helicopters struck an oil depot in Belgorod on 1 April, have brought a new element into the war, raising the previously unthinkable possibility that some of the devastating damage that Moscow has inflicted on Ukraine will come to Russia's own territory.</p>

“We talk a lot about what is happening, of course. The atmosphere in the city is sort of tense,” said Anna, a local teacher.

“Life goes on, but sometimes it is impossible to ignore it, like the time the city was in thick smoke,” she said, referring to the fuel depot attack.

In this week alone, officials in Belgorod reported at least three attacks. Last week, Vyacheslav Gladkov, the governor of the Belgorod region, claimed a strike on a small town in the area had killed one Russian civilian.

During the last week, Ukrainian forces have recaptured villages from Russian troops north and north-east of Kharkiv, pushing them back towards the border near Belgorod. This has given some relief to Kharkiv, Ukraine’s second-largest city, which is only an hour’s drive from Belgorod and has been under enemy bombardment since the war began in February.

And while the consensus among military experts remains that Ukraine will not aim for a push into Russian territory, its advances have been met with unease in Belgorod and across Russia.

In a recent live Q and A with locals, Gladkov was forced to answer questions from worried voters about what the recent Ukrainian advances would mean for Belgorod. The governor tried to offer reassurance but admitted that certain parts of the region were under “constant shelling”.

He has also raised the city threat levels to “yellow”, the second-highest in a three-tier system, and a heavier police presence is now being felt across the city, according to Anna.

There have also been reports of two fires at defence ministry facilities in the Belgorod region as well as damage inflicted to a key Russian railway bridge, leading to speculation that Ukrainian saboteurs have been active on Russian territory. Russian officials have not commented on the incidents, and it remains unclear what caused the fires.

Nikita Parmenov, a journalist at the independent Fonar outlet, said the lack of information regarding some of the recent fires has led to “fears and gossip that Ukrainians have infiltrated the towns and villages in the region”.

Still, despite the direct threat posed by Ukraine, Parmenov said there were no visible signs of an upsurge in patriotism in Belgorod.

“Many here have direct links with Ukraine, they talk to relatives across the border. It feels like we have a better understanding of what is going on than most regions in Russia,” said the journalist, who has himself been in contact with his aunt from Odesa.

“Enthusiasm for the special military operation feels muted. It has torn some families apart, while others prefer not to speak about the conflict with their friends and siblings in Ukraine.”

But it is not just Ukrainian attacks that have disrupted life on Russia’s borderlands – the war has had broader effects, too. Since the start of the invasion, Moscow has suspended the work of 11 airports in parts of central and southern Russia that are close to Ukraine, citing the “difficult situation surrounding Ukraine”, and hindering travel for millions of Russians.

Among the airports shut are those serving popular holiday destinations, including some in the annexed Crimean peninsula and the Black Sea resort towns of Gelendzhik and Krasnodar.

“I am expecting a disastrous summer holiday season,” said one hotel owner in Sevastopol.

During the first weekend of May, when Russians usually travel to the country’s south, the hotel occupancy rate in Crimea was 10–15%, according to a study by the Russian business outlet Kommersant.

	<p>The Crimean tourism industry expects that up to 70% of hotel rooms will remain empty over the summer holidays because of difficulties travelling to Crimea and worries that the peninsula is too close to the war.</p> <p>“It is going to be a tough summer,” said the owner of the mid-sized Crimean hotel. “But in war, you have to make sacrifices.”</p>
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HEADLINE	05/19 SPD report: 80% 911 calls non-crime events
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3479482/spd-report-discovers-80-of-911-calls-were-for-non-criminal-events/
GIST	<p>After reviewing more than 1.2 million 911 calls from 2017 to 2019, the Seattle Police Department (SPD) found 79.7% of calls were for non-criminal events. Just 6% were associated with felonies of any kind.</p> <p>The SPD contracted the National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform (NICJR) to conduct an analysis of the types of calls the department handled from the years 2017 through 2019.</p> <p>The analysis coincided with then-mayor Jenny Durkan’s September 2020 executive order, Reimagining Policing and Community Safety in Seattle. The study was meant to inform SPD of recommendations for alternative, non-police responses to certain calls.</p> <p>With Seattle’s police force stretched as thin as it is — new data revealed 43 sworn-in police staff have left in 2022, while just 13 have been hired — Seattle’s Public Safety and Human Services Committee is attempting to redistribute the police force for more urgent 911 calls.</p> <p>“70% of calls for services did not require a law enforcement response or were appropriate for a dual response by law enforcement and a community-based/non-law enforcement service provider,” the NICJR report read.</p> <p>“The NICJR analysis from a high-level perspective is a great way to begin to enter the conversation. Once these events have resolved themselves, they kind of land in these buckets that you can roughly say, well that eventually didn’t end up needing a police responder,” said Loren Atherley, the Senior Research Scientist for the SPD. “But the trick in this is being able to forecast, not predict, but be able to forecast in terms of supporting human decision making at the various stages along call processing, what this event may turn out to be so that we can right size the response from the perspective of evidence-based policing.”</p> <p>NICJR has a standard four-tier model to decide whether a particular call for service should be responded to by SPD, a “community emergency response network” (CERN), or both.</p> <p>Tier 1 is CERN dispatched only, non-criminal. Tier 2 is CERN lead, with officers present, for events that involve a misdemeanor with low potential of violence. If CERN arrives on the scene and determines there is low potential for violence and an arrest is unnecessary or unlikely, officers can leave.</p> <p>Tier 3 is officers lead, with CERN present for a non-violent felony or when an arrest is likely. If officers arrive on the scene and determine there is no need for an arrest or an arrest is unlikely with no signs of violence, officers step back, and CERN takes the lead. Tier 4 is officers only for serious, violent felonies or a high likelihood of arrest.</p> <p>During Seattle’s public safety meeting, Denver, Colorado was referenced as an example of a city that used a similar pilot program to dictate who responds to specific 911 calls. Denver has used this pilot program for the past two years on 2,700 calls without any incident or problem. Due to the program’s success, Denver announced the city is expanding its system to 10,000 calls over the course of a year.</p> <p>“I’m not sure Denver and how they’re doing their things should dictate how Seattle does it. It’s going to be relevant information and something we want to know, but I’m not sure it’s dispositive of how we’re going to roll out our resources,” Seattle Director of Public Safety Andrew Myerberg said. “Denver has different</p>

	<p>dynamics. They have more resources for mental health providers that respond to calls. It's a little bit of a different framework than what we have in our current structure in Seattle."</p> <p>Seattle Police Chief Adrian Diaz pushed back on the NICJR report with a letter for the council by claiming 97% of calls received by the department are resolved differently than they are initially classified.</p> <p>"In reality, it's not possible to accurately predict the outcome of every call," he said. "Consequently, until now, 911 call centers have treated all calls as high or extreme risk and sent an all-hazard officer, i.e., a police officer."</p>
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HEADLINE	05/19 Putin loses faith in top generals
SOURCE	https://www.usnews.com/news/world-report/articles/2022-05-19/putin-loses-faith-in-top-generals-following-high-profile-failures-in-ukraine
GIST	<p>Russian President Vladimir Putin has lost faith in his top general and has fired other senior commanders for their high-profile and embarrassing failures on the battlefield in Ukraine, British intelligence believes.</p> <p>U.K. military intelligence reports Tuesday morning that the Kremlin has fired Lt. Gen. Serhiy Kisel, commander of the elite 1st Guards Tank Army, for failing to capture Kharkiv. International attention has focused on the strategically critical northeastern Ukrainian city in recent days following news Ukrainian forces capitalized on Russia's retreat and had pushed the invading troopss back to their border. The commander of Russia's Black Sea Fleet, Vice Admiral Igor Osipov, has also come under suspension likely for allowing the flagship cruiser Moskva to sink in April from an apparent missile attack – for which the Ukrainian military claims credit.</p> <p>Perhaps most notably, Valeriy Gerasimov, the chief of the Russian General Staff – a position roughly analogous to the U.S. chairman of the Joint Chiefs – remains in his post but, British intelligence believes, "it is unclear whether he retains the confidence of President Putin."</p> <p>The damning assessment follows reports that at least a dozen Russian generals have died on the battlefield – a seemingly stunning fact that the Pentagon has downplayed as indicative of how the Kremlin goes to war combined with the dysfunctional state of a Soviet-era army.</p> <p>And it comes amid growing belief that Putin himself is now directing the tactical decisions of his military as Russian forces continue to fail to meet their objectives, chiefly seizing control of the Ukrainian government, while facing growing pressure at home.</p> <p>"A culture of cover-ups and scape-goating is probably prevalent within the Russian military and security system," according to the assessment. "Many officials involved in the invasion of Ukraine will likely be increasingly distracted by efforts to avoid personal culpability for Russia's operational set-backs.</p> <p>The assessment suggested that the developments will likely place further strain on Russia's centralized model of command and control, as officers increasingly seek to defer key decisions to their superiors. "It will be difficult for Russia to regain the initiative under these conditions," it said.</p> <p>Ukrainian officials have for weeks touted reports and images on social media that supposedly show Russian general officers among the battlefield casualties, including one widely shared instance in March in which a general's corpse appeared to be left behind in the mud as his own troops relocated.</p> <p>Mykhailo Podoliak, a senior adviser to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, at the time tweeted the names of generals he says were killed, adding that these deaths show the Russian army "is fully unprepared & fights only with numbers & cruise missiles."</p>

	<p>A Pentagon official told reporters at the time that the composition of Russia's army differs sharply from its Western counterparts, particularly American armed forces that delegate consequential decision-making authority to junior officers and rely heavily on the seasoned operational experience of senior enlisted non-commissioned officers.</p> <p>"They don't organize their military the way we do," the official said, suggesting that Russia's doctrine places its generals in hazardous situations more readily than for their American counterparts.</p> <p>Only one American general died in combat during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Maj. Gen. Harold Greene was killed in 2014 by an Afghan National Army member who opened fire on dignitaries visiting a headquarters in Afghanistan during an inspection tour. His killing by foreign combatants marked the first among general officers since the Sept. 11 attack on the Pentagon, and it was the first on foreign territory since the Vietnam War.</p>
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HEADLINE	05/20 Day 86 of the Russia invasion
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/20/russia-ukraine-war-what-we-know-on-day-86-of-the-invasion
GIST	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskiy has said the Donbas, where Russia is now concentrating its main effort, has been "completely destroyed". "There's hell, and that's not an exaggeration," he said in his nightly address. "The bombing and shelling of other cities, the air and missile strikes of the Russian army – all this is not just hostilities during the war." Russia's foreign ministry said it would consider opening access to Ukraine's Black Sea ports only if the removal of sanctions against Russia was also considered. The remarks of the Russian deputy foreign minister, Andrei Rudenko, came after the UN food chief, David Beasley, pleaded with president Vladimir Putin, saying millions would die around the world because of the Russian blockade of the ports. The US Congress has approved \$40bn in military and humanitarian aid to Ukraine, with both parties eagerly backing the latest effort to support an ally under Russian assault. Final passage came as Antony Blinken, the secretary of state, said the US had authorised shipping Ukraine another \$100m worth of weapons and equipment from Pentagon stocks. Mykhailo Podolyak, Ukraine's top presidential adviser and a member of the negotiating team, said a ceasefire with Russia was "impossible without total Russian troops withdrawal". Podolyak said Kyiv was not interested in a new "Minsk", referring to the 2015 Minsk agreement, brokered by France and Germany, which attempted to secure a ceasefire between the Ukrainian government and Russia-backed separatists in the east of Ukraine. Russia has said a further 771 Ukrainian troops have "surrendered" at Mariupol's besieged Azovstal steelworks, bringing the total number to 1,730 this week, while the International Committee of the Red Cross said it had started registering the Ukrainian prisoners of war who left the plant. It is not clear how many remain at the plant. Putin's youngest daughter, Katerina Tikhonova, flew to Munich, Germany, "more than 50 times" between 2017 and 2019, travelling on chartered flights with full state support, according to an investigation by Germany's Spiegel magazine and independent Russian media outlet iStories. Her enthusiasm for Europe appears to match that of the oligarch "scum and traitors" Putin has decried since the start of the war. Vadim Shishimarin, a 21-year-old tank commander, asked a Ukrainian widow to forgive him for the murder of her husband after pleading guilty on Wednesday to killing an unarmed 62-year-old civilian in the north-east Ukrainian village of Chupakhivka on 28 February. Russia's promise to use lasers to shoot down drones in Ukraine has prompted widespread scepticism that the novel and possibly nuclear-powered weaponry could be deployed on the battlefield or have any significant impact on the war. Zelenskiy described it as a "wunderwaffe" – a nonexistent "wonder weapon" that was originally a propaganda invention of the Nazis. The US president, Joe Biden, said Finland and Sweden "meet every Nato requirement and then some" to join the alliance and have the "full, complete backing" of the US. Speaking at a joint press conference at the White House with Sweden's prime minister, Magdalena Andersson,

	<p>and Finland's president, Sauli Niinistö, he also said he was confident Turkey's concerns regarding their membership could be addressed.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The former German chancellor Gerhard Schröder will lose some of his post-office privileges after failing to cut his links with Russian energy companies over the Ukraine war, the Bundestag's budgetary committee has decided. Schröder – chancellor from 1998 to 2005 – will be stripped of his office and staff, which cost about €419,000 (\$443,000) in taxpayers' money in 2021. • G7 financial leaders have agreed on \$18.4bn aid to help Ukraine and said they were ready to stand by Kyiv and “do more as needed”, according to a draft communique seen by Reuters. Finance ministers and central bank governors of the US, Japan, Canada, Britain, Germany, France and Italy are holding talks as Ukraine is running out of cash. • McDonald's has reached a deal to sell all its restaurants in Russia to one of its licensees in the country, the businessman Alexander Govor, who will operate them under a new name. • More than a million Ukrainian refugees have already returned home, according to the country's ambassador to the UK, Vadym Prystaiko. He said the mayors of Kyiv and Kharkiv had had to tell people not to return to the cities as it was still unsafe.
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HEADLINE	05/19 US: Russia using food as weapon
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/20/us-accuses-russia-of-weaponising-food-in-ukraine-crisis-and-holding-global-supplies-hostage
GIST	<p>The United States has accused Russia of holding the world's food supply hostage amid growing fears of famine in developing countries, as a former Russian president warned that the Kremlin would not release vital grain shipments without an end to western sanctions.</p> <p>Speaking at a UN security council meeting on Thursday, US secretary of state Antony Blinken demanded that Russia lift its blockade of Ukraine's Black Sea ports and enable the flow of food and fertiliser around the world.</p> <p>“The Russian government seems to think that using food as a weapon will help accomplish what its invasion has not – to break the spirit of the Ukrainian people,” he said at the meeting called by the Biden administration.</p> <p>“The food supply for millions of Ukrainians and millions more around the world has quite literally been held hostage by the Russian military,” he added.</p> <p>Blinken called on Russia to “stop threatening to withhold food and fertiliser exports from countries that criticise your war of aggression.”</p> <p>Russia and Ukraine produce 30% of the global wheat supply and 69% of the world's sunflower oil.</p> <p>Earlier on Thursday, Dmitry Medvedev, a former president of Russia who is now senior security official, warned that Russia would not continue food supplies unless the west eased its sanctions on the Kremlin.</p> <p>After pleas from western government and the United Nations to Moscow to allow the flow of food to avert possible famine in some countries, Medvedev said on Thursday that Russia was ready to do so but expected “assistance from trading partners, including on international platforms” in return.</p> <p>“Otherwise, there's no logic: on the one hand, insane sanctions are being imposed against us, on the other hand, they are demanding food supplies,” Medvedev said on the messaging app Telegram.</p> <p>“Things don't work like that, we're not idiots.”</p> <p>“Countries importing our wheat and other food products will have a very difficult time without supplies from Russia. And on European and other fields, without our fertilisers, only juicy weeds will grow,”</p>

added Medvedev, who served as president between 2008 and 2012 but is now deputy chairman of Russia's security council.

"We have every opportunity to ensure that other countries have food, and food crises do not happen. Just don't interfere with our work."

Ertharin Cousin, chief executive and founder of Food Systems for the Future, and a co-author of a report on the issue with Boston Consulting Group, said the crisis could have ramifications across the world. "While this crisis will impact all of us around the world in significant ways, low-income economies risk devastation and potential unrest," she said. "We're not just talking about the poorest of the poor, who are already suffering from hunger. We're also talking about people who could recently afford a loaf of bread for their families and who now will be unable to do so."

The demand to have sanctions on the Russian economy lifted could intensify western efforts to supply Ukraine with the weapons it needs to be able to challenge Russia's naval blockade. Ukraine has already sunk Russia's flagship battle cruiser Moskva but its military would need more sophisticated missiles in order to force the Russian Black Sea fleet to back off.

According to a report by Reuters, the White House is working on such a plan. Three US officials and two congressional sources said two types of powerful anti-ship missiles were in active consideration for either direct shipment to Ukraine, or via transfer from a European ally that has the missiles, Reuters reported on Thursday.

The plans are tempered by concerns that supplying Ukraine with the latest anti-ship weaponry could intensify the conflict. Current and former US officials and congressional sources have also cited roadblocks to sending longer range, more powerful weapons to Ukraine that include lengthy training requirements, difficulties maintaining equipment, or concerns weaponry could be captured by Russian forces.

Moscow's military campaign in Ukraine and a barrage of unprecedented international sanctions on Russia have disrupted supplies of fertiliser, wheat and other commodities from both countries, pushing up prices for food and fuel, especially in developing nations.

Serhii Dvornyk, a member of Ukraine's mission to the UN, backed Blinken's claim and called on Russia to stop "stealing" Ukrainian grain and unblock the ports, noting that 400 million people around the world depended on grain from Ukraine.

The country's grain exports fell from 5m tons a month before Russia's February invasion to 200,000 tons in March and about 1.1m tons in April, he added.

Russia's ambassador to the UN, Vassily Nebenzia, countered by saying his country was being blamed for all of the world's woes.

He said the world had long suffered from a food crisis caused by an inflationary spiral stemming from rising costs of insurance, logistical snarls, and speculation on western markets.

He argued that Ukraine's ports are blocked by Ukraine itself, which, he said, had placed mines along the Black Sea coast.

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HEADLINE	05/20 New Marshall Plan to rebuild Ukraine?
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/20/pete-buttigieg-says-us-backs-new-marshall-plan-to-rebuild-ukraine
GIST	A leading figure in the Biden administration has backed a recovery programme for Ukraine in the style of the Marshall plan, which helped rebuild Europe after the second world war.

Pete Buttigieg, the US transportation secretary, said there was plenty of political will at home and internationally towards cooperating in long-term reconstruction efforts including to buttress existing infrastructure in Ukraine.

“With the memory of the Marshall plan in mind, what we’re talking about is not only about how we fund immediate needs and support their ability to maintain the war effort, but how we support the ability of Ukraine to be economically viable and generate a sustainable future for themselves, even as they’re under attack,” the former presidential candidate said in an interview with the Guardian.

Buttigieg admitted that while “the destruction of Ukrainian homes and infrastructure is still under way”, to talk about reconstruction might feel premature “and yet in my encounters with Ukrainian leaders, and particularly my counterpart [Oleksandr Kubrakov], who I speak to regularly, they are already thinking about reconstruction even as they’re thinking about defending their homeland and it’s inspiring to see and it deserves strong and unified support from us.”

He said a “major topic of conversation” among transport ministers at the world meeting in Leipzig this week for the International Transport Forum was how they could help to get grain and other produce out of Ukraine, which is stuck because of blocked and destroyed ports and railway lines and is threatening to create a global food shortage.

“This is not only something that concerns us, as friends to Ukraine, but also concerns us because the world needs that production, especially on the agricultural side,” he said.

“Without access to the Black Sea, it’s always going to be a major disadvantage. We’re committed to helping there in any way we can.

“But I really admire in my Ukrainian counterparts that they’re thinking about the short and the long term at the same time – how to shore up infrastructure in the immediate term – the heroic work by the railway workers to restore connections so that goods can be moved from west to east and people from east to west.

“But they’re also thinking about very long-term questions and recognising that what they rebuild towards will not simply be a reconstruction of the Soviet-era infrastructure that this generation of Ukrainians has inherited.”

Buttigieg was speaking on the sidelines of an event hosted by the German Marshall Fund NGO in Berlin to mark the 50th anniversary of the Marshall plan, a multibillion-dollar recovery programme initiated by the US in 1947 that provided humanitarian and economic assistance to millions of Europeans to ease their recovery after the second world war.

The plan was named after George Marshall, the man who was then US secretary of state.

Buttigieg, who is in charge of implementing and overseeing a large swathe of projects in the US enabled under the \$1tn (£800bn) infrastructure bill that passed six months ago, stressed the relevance to the US as well as Ukraine of Marshall’s insistence about the need to create a “virtuous circle” between the economic security of a nation and its political stability based on its capacity to deliver.

He said that decades of disinvestment in the US had turned the virtuous cycle into a vicious one, with political institutions that lacked the resources to deliver well losing their legitimacy, leading to an erosion of trust, “which has given credence to those who would undermine those institutions, further diminishing their capacity to deliver”, he said.

The infrastructure fund was intended to break that cycle, he added. “If we can deliver as we’re setting out to do ... then citizens will see what it means for them. We’ve got all kinds of things that have scrambled up our political and social life right now, including the information environment, the forms of

extremism ... and shocks like the pandemic, and economic reverberations from the war in Europe. It's all the more reason for us to focus on delivering for people."

He said that the stakes included not just comfort and convenience, but "perhaps also the credibility of governance itself".

"In the 1930s, another season when democracy was in doubt, and when it had become fashionable in some circles in Washington to point approvingly to the rise in dictators, some would say by way of praise for fascism that Mussolini makes the trains run on time.

"This turns out to not be particularly true, by the way ... but how revealing it is that this excuse for autocrats comes on the basis of their supposed prowess in providing transportation."

Regarding Ukraine, Buttigieg said he was interested in President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's calls for reconstruction on a cities and regional level, under a plan apparently gaining traction, by which cities and communities across the world would adopt similar communities in Ukraine to their own ones.

"Understanding the needs and different capacities of different parts of the country is going to be very important," Buttigieg said.

Asked if his government's legitimacy over helping to rebuild a country was to be trusted after its chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan, Buttigieg, who served in the country as an officer in the US Navy Reserve, said:

"Part of what we were up against in Afghanistan is just how fundamentally different the society, the values, the governance culture and the economics of that country are ... it's very different in Ukraine ... one of the things that unites us to Ukraine are some of those core values around democracy.

"It's so early to know what will be at the end of this upheaval. What we know is that the kind of united approach we have that reflects shared values among our partners and with Ukrainians is a very powerful one and will be an important basis of the relationship.

"Not just in getting us through this war, whatever the endgame looks like, but in a reconstruction that really does hold the promise of leading to new and innovative things."

He praised the leadership he said Germany had shown since the start of the invasion, contrasting with the criticism the government of Olaf Scholz has received.

"I think it's understood in Washington that the new steps that Germany has taken are major steps in security and energy policy ... none of us knows what lies on the other side of this Zeitenwende," he said, adopting the phrase used by Scholz meaning "turning point", "but all of us should recognise that the only way for it to lead to a good place is for us to find our way to it together."

Earlier on Thursday, Buttigieg took a tour of Berlin's Hauptbahnhof or central station, a symbol of German unification, and met a group of Germans and US citizens of Ukrainian origin working as volunteers to receive refugees, about 2,000 of whom are arriving on trains from Ukraine each day.

"Just make sure you help us by keeping the narrative alive back home," one of the volunteers, Natalia, from Minnesota and of Ukrainian descent, told him as Buttigieg thanked the women for their work.

Buttigieg, who ran for the US presidency in 2020 but withdrew in favour of supporting Joe Biden, would not be drawn on whether he had plans to run again in 2024.

"Right now my ambitions are to be the best secretary of transportation that I can," he said. "I think there's never been a better time to have this job."

HEADLINE	05/19 Thousands of firefighters tackle blazes
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/20/5000-firefighters-tackle-wildfires-across-us-south-west
GIST	<p>More than 5,000 firefighters have battled multiple wildland blazes in dry, windy weather across the south-west, including a fire that has destroyed dozens of structures in west Texas and another picking up steam again in New Mexico.</p> <p>Evacuation orders remained in place on Thursday for residents near the wildfires in Texas, Colorado and New Mexico. High winds prevented officials from sending aircraft to drop retardant or water in many places.</p> <p>Dangerous fire weather fuelled by gusty winds, high temperatures and extremely low humidity was predicted to continue through Friday, especially in New Mexico, where the largest US wildfire has burned for more than a month and the governor expects the number of structures destroyed will exceed 1,000.</p> <p>Fire officials said ground crews worked hard to keep the most active flames in check at the fire in a region between Santa Fe and Taos.</p> <p>“Today, we saw a real good, old-fashioned firefight out there,” US forest service fire behavior analyst Stewart Turner said on Thursday night. “Tomorrow is going to be a big day, bigger than we saw today.”</p> <p>Gusty winds were expected on Friday before easing into the weekend when cooler temperatures also should provide some relief, Turner said.</p> <p>More than 2,100 fire personnel were fighting that blaze, which has burned more than 473 square miles (122,000 hectares) of timber and brush in a region east of Santa Fe and south of Taos.</p> <p>Only about a third of the fire’s perimeter is estimated to be contained. But fire operations chief Carl Schwope said crews quickly snuffed out new fires sparked by embers blowing ahead of the main blaze in steep, rugged terrain.</p> <p>“Aircraft got shut down early because of high winds, so they are there on their own,” Schwope said. “Across this entire fire area, things are looking really favorable, a lot better than we had expected it to look at his time yesterday.”</p> <p>He added: “It doesn’t mean we didn’t have fire growth today and we are definitely going to see more fire movement tomorrow. But as of now, things are looking really good.”</p> <p>In Texas, the Texas A&M forestry service said the fire that has burned dozens of homes was still only 5% contained on Thursday afternoon after charring more than 15 square miles (3,800 hectares) of juniper and mesquite brush 18 miles (29km) south-west of Abilene.</p> <p>That fire had prompted the evacuation of the historic town of Buffalo Gap on Wednesday. Forestry service spokesman Stuart Morris said the town had reopened Thursday and that no injuries had been reported, but 27 structures had been destroyed.</p> <p>Morris said in an email on Thursday night that a post-fire assessment team was working to document what kind of structures were destroyed and that it was not yet clear how many were residences.</p> <p>All of West Texas was under a red flag wildfire danger warning on Thursday, with an underlying drought and critically to extremely dry vegetation combining with temperatures of 100F (37.7C) and gusty winds.</p> <p>However, the forestry service said a new weather pattern by the weekend is expected to usher in cooler temperatures and moisture that could limit potential for wildfire activity on Saturday and Sunday.</p>

	Wildfires have broken out this spring earlier than usual across multiple states in the western US, where climate change and an enduring drought are fanning the frequency and intensity of forest and grassland fires.
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HEADLINE	05/19 Calif. gas average \$6/gal for first time
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/business/2022/may/19/california-gas-average-6-gallon-record-high
GIST	<p>The average price of gas in California has surpassed \$6 a gallon for the first time ever as fuel costs across the US reach record highs.</p> <p>Drivers in the Golden state are paying more for a gallon of fuel than anywhere else in the country at an average of \$6.06, an all-time high for California and the US, according to AAA. The national average is nearly \$4.59 a gallon, also a record, increasing 10 cents since Monday. Meanwhile, in some rural regions of California prices are even higher – fuel costs more than \$7 a gallon in Mono county in the state’s east.</p> <p>Prices are surging due to rising demand and tighter supply, according to AAA, and consumers will continue to pay more at the pumps amid the switch to summer blends of fuel, which can add as much as 10 cents a gallon.</p> <p>“The high cost of oil, the key ingredient in gasoline, is driving these high pump prices for consumers,” Andrew Gross, AAA spokesperson, said in a statement this week. “Even the annual seasonal demand dip for gasoline during the lull between spring break and Memorial Day, which would normally help lower prices, is having no effect this year.”</p> <p>With pandemic-induced inflation and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, fuel prices in California have remained high in recent months, even as they fell in other states. Those costs have hit Californians hard, particularly gig workers for whom fuel makes up a large part of their daily costs.</p> <p>The record-breaking costs come as inflation, which is at a nearly 40-year high, has sent the prices of basic necessities soaring. In California, the governor has proposed an \$18.1bn relief package to ease the pain of inflation.</p> <p>The plan includes \$11.5bn earmarked for \$400 checks that would be sent to eligible registered vehicle owners, more than \$4bn for emergency rental assistance and past due utility bills, and millions to allow for free public transit for three months and waiving the diesel sales tax. Meanwhile, the state’s minimum wage could reach \$15.50 an hour in January due to a law that requires an accelerated increase when inflation rises above 7%.</p> <p>California’s governor, Gavin Newsom, has faced growing criticism, particularly from conservative lawmakers, that he is not doing enough to combat high fuel costs in the state. Republican lawmakers have advocated for suspending the state’s gas tax, which is the second-highest in the country at 51 cents a gallon, a proposal that is now gaining support from some Democrats. But Democratic leaders have generally been skeptical about pausing the tax as they worry oil companies would not pass the savings along to drivers.</p> <p>Ro Khanna, a California Democrat, argues oil companies are to blame for high fuel prices and said his party should target them. “The reality is that every American is sacrificing at this time – paying five bucks, six bucks in my district – at the pump, and they’re seeing big oil making record profits at the same time because of the war in Ukraine,” he told Time earlier this month. “That’s not fair.”</p> <p>Residents in Mono county, which has some of the most expensive gas in the state, echoed Khanna’s criticisms.</p> <p>“Here we are struggling to even work enough to get enough gas even go to work,” Linda Dore told USAToday. “I mean it’s definitely, how many billions do they need?”</p>

HEADLINE	05/19 Extreme heat, drought fuel Texas wildfires
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/19/us/texas-mesquite-heat-fire.html
GIST	<p>High winds, drought conditions and extreme temperatures have caused a series of wildfires in Texas, including one that the authorities on Thursday said had destroyed about 30 structures and burned more than 9,000 acres.</p> <p>The fast-moving Mesquite Heat Fire, just southwest of Abilene, Texas, was 5 percent contained on Thursday afternoon and was one of nine wildfires that the Texas A&M Forest Service was battling across the state, the agency said.</p> <p>In Wilbarger County, in North Texas, the Coconut Fire has burned 25,000 acres and was 20 percent contained, the agency said Thursday. A firefighter sustained burns while battling the fire on Tuesday. The firefighter was treated at a hospital and released, the forest service said.</p> <p>In Taylor County, the site of the Mesquite Heat Fire, the area was facing drought conditions, wind gusts of up to 30 miles per hour and temperatures far exceeding 100 degrees, said Elise Roberts, a spokeswoman for the Abilene Fire Department.</p> <p>Under these conditions, she said, “fires are really easily started and very hard to contain.”</p> <p>The fire in Taylor County was the product of a “roadside start,” Ms. Roberts said. The origin could have been something like a cigarette flicked from a window or a catalytic converter falling off a vehicle.</p> <p>“In conditions that we’re in now,” Ms. Roberts said, “any little spark can start a fire easily.”</p> <p>County Judge Downing Bolls of Taylor County said the hot weather was especially challenging for firefighters on the front lines.</p> <p>“It is just stifling,” Mr. Bolls said. “I don’t know how the firefighters are doing it. It’s almost intolerable.”</p> <p>He said that officials were hoping for rain, but little of it has come so far, even though May and June are typically the area’s wettest months.</p> <p>“This is not good,” he said.</p> <p>Wildfires could occur in Texas hill country and the rolling plains through Friday, and new fires in grass and brush vegetation will most likely be difficult to control because of the dry and hot conditions, according to the forest service.</p> <p>The state could get relief over the weekend. A cold front is expected to move through the state, potentially limiting the spread of wildfires on Saturday and Sunday, according to the agency.</p> <p>Wildfires are increasing in size and intensity in the Western United States, and wildfire seasons are growing longer. Recent research has suggested that heat and dryness associated with global warming are major reasons for the increase in bigger and stronger fires.</p> <p>Days of abnormally high temperatures have contributed to the intensity of fires by making vegetation drier and more likely to ignite. Analyses have shown that climate change has increased the likelihood of such extreme heat waves.</p>
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HEADLINE	05/19 Census miscounted population 14 states
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/19/us/2020-census-miscount-states.html

WASHINGTON — The 2020 census undercounted the population of six states and overcounted residents in eight others, the Census Bureau said on Thursday, a finding that highlighted the difficulties of conducting the most star-crossed population count in living memory.

The conclusions come from [a survey of 161,000 housing units](#) conducted after the census was completed, a standard procedure following each once-in-a-decade head count of the U.S. population. The results showed that six states — Arkansas, Florida, Illinois, Mississippi, Tennessee and Texas — most likely have a larger population than was officially counted.

Eight states probably have fewer residents than were recorded, the survey found: Delaware, Hawaii, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New York, Ohio, Rhode Island and Utah. The count in the remaining 36 states and the District of Columbia was basically accurate, the bureau said.

The results were markedly worse than in the 2010 census, in which none of the states had a statistically significant overcount or undercount, the agency found. But they were not unlike the conclusions from the 2000 census post-mortem, which found overcounts in 22 states and an undercount in the District of Columbia.

John H. Thompson, the director of the Census Bureau from 2013 to 2017, said he was not surprised by the variations given the problems that dogged the 2020 census. “All censuses have overcounts and undercounts,” he said. “That does not preclude using the results.”

Still, for the states that missed the mark, the numbers were striking. The bureau said the greatest undercount was in Arkansas, where the census likely missed 5.04 percent of the population — some 160,000 people, or the equivalent of nearly 80 percent of the state’s largest city, Little Rock.

However, that was just the midrange of a much wider band of estimates. The undercount could have been as small as about 43,000 people, the agency said, or as large as 286,000.

Similarly, the bureau pegged the undercount in fast-growing Texas at 570,000 people, but said it could range roughly between 167,000 and 985,000. And in New York, the bureau estimated that it counted 695,000 more people than actually lived there, but said the estimate could be as low as 382,000 or as high as one million.

The Census Bureau said in March that the same survey had found undercounts of Black and Hispanic people in the national population totals, as well as overcounts of white people and people of Asian descent. Overcounts of white people and undercounts of other racial and ethnic groups have been a persistent problem in past censuses.

The survey was not broad enough to offer reliable estimates of those racial and ethnic discrepancies on a state-by-state basis, the bureau said.

The post-mortem will not change the official state-by-state results of the census, which said 331,449,281 people were living in the United States in 2020. Nor will it alter the allotment of seats in the House of Representatives or the map boundaries in state and local political districts, which are redrawn every 10 years using census results.

The Supreme Court has barred the use of surveys in apportioning seats in the House, and in any case, the large margin of error in the post-2020 census survey makes its conclusions more like educated guesses than solid findings.

“There definitely would have been changes in reapportionment,” said Andrew Beveridge, a demographics expert and a professor emeritus of sociology at Queens College. “But just how isn’t clear.”

One of many possible scenarios to consider is Minnesota, which came within a few thousand people of not getting the 435th and last House seat after the 2020 census reapportionment. The post-mortem concluded that the census overcounted the state's population by somewhere between 128,000 and 310,000 people.

Minnesota might still have held on to the seat after a more accurate count because competing states like New York overcounted an even greater number of people. But it also could have lost the seat to a state like Texas, where the undercount was sizable.

The survey did not attempt to determine why some states were miscounted, but experts say there are many possible explanations, led by the Covid-19 pandemic, which roared across the country as the census was being conducted.

In particular, the pandemic made many people reluctant to open their doors to census takers in the late summer of 2020, when the bureau was trying to get information about tens of millions of people whose households had not filled out census forms.

The geography of the miscounts also points to other potential causes. Five of the six states with population undercounts were in the Deep South, while six of the eight states that were most overcounted were in the North, and particularly the Northeast.

Some Southern states like Florida and Texas have large populations of Hispanic people, who were badly undercounted on a national scale. The South also was hit by hurricanes in the latter stages of the count. And when census takers began fanning out to conduct personal interviews in August 2020, the South was coming off a major summertime spike in coronavirus cases.

There could also be a political dimension to the results. Five of the six undercounted states are solidly Republican, while six of the eight overcounted ones are largely Democratic.

The antigovernment tenor of the Trump administration and Republican governors in 2020 could have raised suspicions about the census in some states, just as attacks on immigrants depressed responses by Hispanics and other people of color, said Steve Jost, a census consultant who was deeply involved in the effort to increase response to the count.

"Leaders who attack the government in the middle of the government's biggest peacetime enterprise shouldn't be surprised to discover their states didn't perform as well as others," Mr. Jost said.

He also noted another telling indicator: All but one of the states with population overcounts, an inaccuracy that can prove beneficial through additional political representation and federal funding, mounted their own campaigns to convince residents to fill out census forms. All but one of the states that were undercounted spent no money to promote the census.

"Some states put money into it big-time, and other states did not," said Kenneth Prewitt, a Columbia University scholar who oversaw the 2000 census. "And the states that put in money did better in terms of getting to the plus or minus that you want."

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HEADLINE	05/19 Hungary resists oil embargo on Russia
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/19/world/europe/hungary-russia-oil.html
GIST	<p>BUDAPEST — Prime Minister Viktor Orban of Hungary has fiercely resisted a proposed European embargo of Russian oil, saying it would devastate his country's economy. Other potential casualties of such a ban would be things close to his heart: his populist campaign promises, and a financial gravy train for culture warriors in Europe and in the United States.</p> <p>Both have been fueled by Hungary's profits from Russian crude. Gorged with cash thanks to cheap supplies of Russian oil and gas, the Hungarian energy conglomerate MOL — one of the Central European</p>

nation's biggest and most profitable companies — last month announced it would pay dividends of \$652 million to its shareholders.

More than \$65 million of that will go to a privately managed education foundation that last year hosted the Fox News host Tucker Carlson at a festival of right-wing pundits in Hungary. It has also provided stipends and fellowships to conservative Americans and Europeans looking for a safe haven from what they bemoan as the spread of “cancel culture” back home.

Some of them featured this week at the first Hungarian edition of the Conservative Political Action Conference, or CPAC, a gathering of the right wing of American politics. The event, at which Mr. Orban gave the keynote speech, opened in Budapest on Thursday under the slogan “God, Homeland, Family.”

Hungary has for years served as a beacon for [foreign conservatives](#) who admire Mr. Orban's hostility to immigrants, L.G.B.T.Q. rights, George Soros and liberals in general. [Russia's invasion of Ukraine](#), however, has put severe strain on that role, stirring anger among some conservatives about Mr. Orban's cozying up to the Kremlin.

It has also threatened to strain Mr. Orban's pact with voters, who gave his Fidesz party a landslide victory in elections last month on the promise that, thanks to cheap energy from Russia, gas and utility prices would not skyrocket as has happened elsewhere in Europe.

A steady supply of Russian energy has become such a central part of Mr. Orban's economic and political model that ending it “is a red line for him,” said Andras Biro-Nagy, founder and director of Policy Solutions, a Budapest research group. “Russian oil and gas are absolutely vital to his whole scheme.”

This dependence has alarmed even some of his foreign fans who have taken up paid positions at Mathias Corvinus Collegium, known as M.C.C., the education foundation that benefits from the Hungarian energy company's business with Russia. The foundation holds a 10 percent stake in MOL, which relies heavily on deliveries of Russian oil to feed its main refinery southwest of Budapest and another one it owns in Slovakia.

“I am very unhappy about the Hungarian position vis-à-vis Russia broadly speaking, and specifically about energy,” said Daniel Pipes, a conservative American scholar awarded a paid “senior fellowship” by the foundation. “At the same time, I am very positive about the Hungarian stance on immigration,” he said. “So I'm ambivalent. I dislike the Russia policy and I do like the immigration policy.”

Also unhappy is Poland, whose governing party, Law and Justice, shares Mr. Orban's hostility to liberals but has been infuriated by his dogged resistance to efforts by the European Union to ban Russian oil, his refusal to let arms destined for Ukraine pass through Hungary and his failure to condemn Russia's president, Vladimir V. Putin.

Worried that the Hungarian energy company is too beholden to Russia, the Polish Senate passed a resolution in March blocking a deal with Poland's state-owned energy company that would have allowed MOL to acquire more than 400 Polish gas stations.

Bogdan Borusewicz, the opposition senator who initiated the move, said in an interview in Gdansk, the site of a big Polish refinery, that the war in Ukraine had made it dangerous to let a Hungarian company dependent on Russia into his country's market.

“You could debate about this before the war,” he said, “but now it is impossible to have any illusions” about the loyalties of Mr. Orban, whom he described as “Putin's most important ally in the E.U.” For the MOL conglomerate, he said, “cooperation with Russia is a crucial part of its business and even its survival.”

MOL declined interview requests but, in public statements, has stressed the difficulty and expense of shifting to non-Russian oil. Its Danube Refinery, south of Budapest, invested heavily over eight years to

accommodate crude from other countries, which is generally more expensive, but it still depends on Russia for 65 percent of its needs.

Reporting a big jump in profits, the Hungarian company warned in its annual financial report this spring that it was exposed to Russia through a minority stake in a small Russian oil company, BaiTex, and by “the physical flow of crude oil through the transportation system in Russia and Ukraine.” That flow, it noted, had not “to date” been restricted.

Since then, the executive arm of the European Union has sought to cut it off entirely.

Doing that, said Tamas Pletser, an oil and gas analyst with Erste Bank in Budapest, would be a severe blow. MOL, he said, has profited until now from a widening price difference between European Brent and the cheaper Russian crude.

“They make an additional \$10 million per day on this current situation, which is based on the Russian supply and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine,” Mr. Pletser said.

Many millions of dollars have gone to the Mathias Corvinus Collegium and two other nominally independent foundations, which together hold 30.49 percent of the energy company and are its biggest shareholders. The shares used to be held by the state, but Mr. Orban two years ago [gifted them](#), along with other valuable assets, to the foundations as part of what he said was an [effort to overhaul education](#) but which critics called [legalized theft](#). The chairman of M.C.C. is Balazs Orban, who is also the prime minister’s political director (though not a relation).

Zoltan Szalai, the foundation’s general director, acknowledged in an interview, “This year, MOL has been very good to us.” The dividend money M.C.C. received this year from MOL is more than double its annual budget.

Mr. Szalai said his foundation should be able to cope with a decline in energy company profits if Mr. Orban loses his fight to keep Russian crude flowing. “We are thinking in the long term, and MOL is a very good and serious company,” Mr. Szalai said.

When it comes to banning Russian oil, “it is not true that Hungary does not have a choice,” said Piotr Wozniak, Poland’s economy minister in a previous Law and Justice government and longtime energy executive. “It will not be cheap or easy but it is not impossible.”

But, he added, “The question is whether Hungary wants to make this choice.”

Making that choice particularly difficult is Mr. Orban’s vote-winning promise last month to keep energy prices in check through government-imposed price caps.

Shortly before the Ukraine invasion, [Mr. Orban traveled to Moscow to meet Mr. Putin](#), securing assurances that [Hungary could count on supplies of Russian natural gas](#).

Moscow last month abruptly [cut off deliveries to Poland and Bulgaria](#) but is still supplying Hungary. Any suspension, either by Russia or as a result of Western sanctions, would force Hungary to buy more expensive supplies on the market.

Giving the keynote address at CPAC on Thursday, Mr. Orban mentioned the war in Ukraine, calling Russia the aggressor, but mostly focused on advising conservatives how to succeed politically. “The first point,” he said, “is that we must play by our own rules.”

Mr. Carlson, the Fox News host who has taken Russia’s side in its war with Ukraine, sent a brief video message of support for the conference.

Most speakers avoided the issue of Ukraine, though one, Gavin Wax, a conservative commentator from New York, complained about tens of billions of dollars spent supporting Ukraine and “nonstop media propaganda pushing for World War III” with Russia.

The main organizer of the event is the Center for Fundamental Rights, a Hungarian outfit funded by the government that says it is fighting to repel the “relentless attack” on “Judeo-Christian culture, patriotism, sovereignty, the family, the created nature of man and woman and our commitment to life.”

The center initially said it was working on CPAC’s Budapest event with the Mathias Corvinus Collegium. The foundation, however, denied helping to organize CPAC, though it said it supported its aims.

Mr. Szalai, the M.C.C. general director, denied his foundation pushed any political agenda, saying in an interview that its mission was to promote “classic common sense.”

“To say we are far right is not fair,” he added.

Mr. Orban’s critics say that M.C.C. has established itself as what Mr. Biro-Nagy of Policy Solutions calls “one of the crown jewels of Orban’s mission to create a conservative, cultural hegemony.”

Among the foreign culture warriors listed by the Mathias Corvinus Collegium among the “guest instructors” this year was Rod Dreher, an American writer who has praised Hungary’s hard-line stance against Muslim immigrants.

Mr. Dreher said he was “not in the least bothered” that M.C.C. benefited from Russian oil. He said his own pay, however, came from another Hungarian government-funded entity.

“I deplore Russia’s invasion, and hope Ukraine prevails, but I don’t share this horror of Russia and ties to Russia that the ruling class in the U.S. and Western Europe do,” he said.

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HEADLINE	05/19 Moscow eyes annexation southeast Ukraine
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/19/world/europe/moscow-russifying-captured-territory.html
GIST	<p>KRAKOW, Poland — Fresh from its triumph over the last armed Ukrainian resistance in the devastated city of Mariupol, Russia appeared to be laying the groundwork Thursday for annexing swaths of southeast Ukraine, described by a high-ranking Kremlin official as having a “worthy place in our Russian family.”</p> <p>The official, Marat Khusnullin, Russia’s deputy prime minister for infrastructure, toured the region this week and outlined plans to take full control of vital infrastructure, including Europe’s largest nuclear power plant, as Russia fortified its defensive positions there and exerted its authority over the local population.</p> <p>“I came here to provide maximum opportunities for integration,” Mr. Khusnullin was quoted by Russian news media as saying.</p> <p>In a further sign that Moscow was preparing to push for the Russification of the region — the way it has in Crimea since seizing it from Ukraine in 2014 — Russian officials have already moved to introduce the ruble currency, install proxy politicians in local governments, impose new school curriculums, reroute internet servers through Russia and cut the population off from Ukrainian broadcasts.</p> <p>Mr. Khusnullin said Russia even intended to charge Ukraine for electricity generated by the Ukrainian nuclear plant that Russian forces commandeered in the early weeks of the invasion — a plan that Ukraine described as extortion.</p> <p>Russia’s moves came as the United States sought to further escalate pressure on the Kremlin. President Biden vowed to help gain speedy approval of applications to join NATO by formerly neutral Finland</p>

and Sweden, as he [welcomed the leaders of those countries to the White House](#) and as U.S. officials expressed confidence that they could satisfy Turkey's objections to Finnish and Swedish membership. And [the Senate overwhelmingly approved a \\$40 billion aid package for Ukraine](#) that Mr. Biden was set to sign into law.

Even as the Russian authorities projected control over a Ukrainian region that is culturally close to Russia, President Vladimir V. Putin appeared to be punishing military subordinates for blunders in the [three-month-old invasion](#).

A report by Britain's defense intelligence agency suggested the Kremlin was conducting a purge of senior commanders deemed responsible for the failures of Russia's initial strategy to seize much more Ukraine territory, including the capital, Kyiv, and second-largest city, Kharkiv. The report raised the question of whether Mr. Putin retained faith in his chief of the general staff, [Valery Gerasimov](#).

The Russians have said nothing about any changes in the military leadership.

Russia's new, narrower strategy of focusing on Ukraine's east has proved more successful than its initially greater aims, even as its forces have retreated in the northeast and struggled to gain ground in the eastern Donbas region.

Following the longest battle of the war, Russian soldiers [completed their capture of Mariupol](#) on Tuesday after having seized control of the sprawling Azovstal steel plant, the last redoubt of Ukrainian defenders. More than 700 fighters from the Azov battalion, die-hards who had made a final stand against the Russians from the plant, surrendered between Wednesday and Thursday, according to the Russian Defense Ministry, bringing the total number of captives to 1,730.

The Kremlin has been using the mass surrender for [propaganda purposes](#), describing its captives as terrorists and Nazi war criminals, and framing the conquest of Mariupol as a turning point in the conflict.

Although much of Mariupol is ruined, the capture of the port city is expected to bring Russia concrete benefits. It will complete a long-sought land bridge between the Russian-controlled Crimean peninsula to the south and the adjoining region known as Donbas, where pro-Russian separatists have battled Ukrainian forces since the Crimea annexation.

With Mariupol captured, Russian troops are now freed to help entrench Russia's authority over the rest of the eastern region — well short of Moscow's initial push to control all of Ukraine, but strong leverage in any future peace negotiations.

The fighting has settled into a stalemate along most of the front.

Stiff Ukrainian resistance is forcing Russian troops to fight in smaller formations and seek more limited objectives elsewhere in the Donbas region, a senior Pentagon official said on Thursday.

"They're going after smaller objectives," the senior official said of the Russian goals, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss operational details of American defense intelligence work. "And sometimes those objectives are only maintained for a short period of time before the Ukrainians take them back. They're just being more modest in what they're trying to go after."

The shift in Russian tactics reflects not only the resilient Ukrainian defense, but also the nagging command, logistics and morale problems that continued to bedevil Russian commanders, especially in the hotly contested Donbas, the official said.

The southern region under Russian control covers a vast expanse that includes Ukraine's agricultural heartland and several key ports. Along with Russia's naval dominion in the Black Sea, annexation would tighten Moscow's stranglehold on the Ukrainian economy and solidify its blockade of Ukraine's southern coast.

In another possible sign of steps to entrench Russia's control, its troops closed checkpoints on Thursday for civilians crossing between Russian-occupied zones and Ukrainian controlled areas in two regions, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia, according to the Ukrainian military and local authorities.

At one checkpoint, near the town of Vasilyevka, a line of cars transporting mostly women and children seeking to evacuate Russian-held areas stretched through farm fields. Ukrainian officials estimated more than 1,000 cars waited at the crossing, said Zlata Nekrasova, the deputy governor of the Ukrainian regional government in Zaporizhzhia.

The Ukrainians have accused Russia of forcibly deporting thousands to Russia and witnesses have described increasingly repressive efforts to enforce Russian rule.

The Kremlin has sought to portray its actions as reflecting popular will. Dmitri S. Peskov, the Kremlin's spokesman, appeared to play down the significance of Mr. Khusnullin's statements signaling annexation, saying only locals could decide.

But in a move that some analysts regarded as reflecting confusion within the Russian leadership about how to secure Ukrainian areas seized by Russia, a group of lawmakers on Thursday submitted a bill to the State Duma that would allow Mr. Putin to establish "temporary administrations on territories where Russia's army conducts military operations."

Mr. Khusnullin said that Russia would soon begin charging Ukraine for electricity from the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant, which Russia has controlled since early March. When fully operational, the plant can produce enough energy for four million homes.

Ukraine's energy provider, NPC Ukrenergo, which called Mr. Khusnullin's statement nuclear blackmail, said the real aim was to give Russia electricity leverage over Ukraine and the rest of Europe. It noted that the plant was part of the Ukrainian power grid and unequipped to deliver power to Russia.

Moscow's announcements were also part of a propaganda campaign aimed at conveying control over areas where its grip is less solid. Military analysts have said Russia's forces could still face Ukrainian uprisings and counteroffensives.

Russia's invasion in February, spearheaded by a rapid advance of tanks and helicopters, ultimately led to many Russian casualties, including some senior generals on the battlefield. The finger-pointing has started, Britain's defense intelligence agency said in its Thursday report.

It said the commander of the elite 1st Guards Tank Army, Lt. Gen. Serhiy Kisel, had been suspended for failure to capture Kharkiv, where Ukrainian forces have not only counterattacked but driven the invaders back toward the Russian border 40 miles away.

The British agency also reported that the commander of Russia's Black Sea fleet, Vice Adm. Igor Osipov, had likely been suspended following the April sinking of the fleet's flagship, the cruiser Moskva. Asked about the report, a senior Pentagon went further, saying the commander had been dismissed.

General Gerasimov, Russia's highest ranking uniformed officer, "likely remains in post but it is unclear whether he retains the confidence" of Mr. Putin, the British report said.

But in a signal that General Gerasimov remained in good standing, he spoke on Thursday by phone with Gen. Mark A. Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Pentagon said. It was their first call since the invasion.

In the port city of Kherson, in the south near the border with Crimea, Mr. Khusnullin inspected infrastructure, including the port, a cargo railway station and a factory.

	<p>“We will live and work together,” he said, adding that Russia had already allocated funds to restore the city’s roads.</p> <p>“We will now eat tomatoes and tomato paste more often in Russia thanks to the work of Kherson’s agricultural producers,” Mr. Khusnullin said, alluding to Kherson’s longtime role as a breadbasket and a global exporter.</p> <p>But even as he spoke, Ukrainian officials said a convoy of civilian cars trying to flee the region came under fire from Russian soldiers. Roughly half of the million people who once lived in the region have fled, with witnesses who escaped offering harrowing stories of Russian repression.</p> <p>In Kyiv, a committee in Ukraine’s Parliament accused Russia of having robbed Kherson of 400,000 tons of grain, sending it to Russia and creating conditions that “may lead to famine in the occupied territories.”</p> <p>A Russian naval blockade of Ukraine’s ports is preventing Ukraine from exporting millions more tons, putting tens of millions of people worldwide at risk of hunger and famine, the U.N. secretary general, António Guterres, said Thursday at a U.N. conference on food security.</p>
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HEADLINE	05/19 Questions remain over formula shortage
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/19/us/politics/baby-formula-production-white-house.html
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — Biden administration officials on Thursday said that a baby formula shortage would continue at least into next month, leaving desperate parents continuing to search for ways to feed their infants even as President Biden and his aides defended their efforts to help restock empty shelves.</p> <p>Dr. Robert Califf, the head of the Food and Drug Administration, told angry lawmakers on Capitol Hill that some efforts — including relaxed guidelines for imports and ramped-up domestic manufacturing — could increase supplies within days. But he said availability of baby formula in stores would not return to normal for weeks.</p> <p>At the same time, administration officials struggled to explain how Mr. Biden’s decision to invoke a Cold War-era statute will help alleviate the shortage of baby formula that has exasperated families across the nation and led to heartbreaking reports of infants sent to the hospital for lack of food.</p> <p>On Wednesday, Mr. Biden authorized use of the Defense Production Act in an effort to ensure formula manufacturers had access to the ingredients and materials they needed to ramp up production. Shortages developed after Abbott Laboratories, which controls 48 percent of the baby formula market, voluntarily recalled some of its most popular products in February and shuttered a plant in Sturgis, Mich., over concerns about possible contamination.</p> <p>But a senior administration official, who spoke to reporters Thursday on the condition of anonymity, declined to say whether any formula companies reported having trouble getting ingredients or materials in a timely manner.</p> <p>In response to numerous questions about the potential impact of the president’s decision, the official repeatedly said the administration was “having active and ongoing conversations with the companies” but declined to say what the companies had requested or even whether the firms had identified problems that required government assistance.</p> <p>The official did not provide information about how much faster the administration believed formula would reach consumers with the invocation of the Defense Production Act. And the official declined to answer when asked why Mr. Biden did not authorize the use of the law weeks ago, when the shortages became much more pronounced.</p>

In a statement, Abbott Laboratories said the act “can be an effective tool to prioritize raw materials and ensure supply of specialized components.”

“We’re already express air-freighting infant formula from our F.D.A.-registered facility in Ireland and welcome any support that these added measures can provide in cutting red tape, increasing volume of imports and speeding up transport time from overseas to the U.S.,” the company said.

The F.D.A. and the White House have raced in recent days to respond to the public outcry over bare grocery store shelves and concerns that desperate parents were rationing their stock or resorting to possibly risky homemade mixtures to feed their infants.

In a video posted to Twitter on Wednesday, Mr. Biden said, “I know parents all across the country are worried about finding enough infant formula to feed their babies. As a parent and as a grandparent, I know just how stressful that is.”

Tinglong Dai, a professor at the Johns Hopkins Carey Business School, said the response reminded him of the Biden administration’s approach to masks and tests during the pandemic.

“They ignored a crisis that was coming,” he said. “They had three months’ time to resolve this potential crisis, but they didn’t do much.”

Mr. Dai said the administration’s recent efforts would help but that the effect would be limited because the industry’s problems had more to do with production schedules and labor shortages.

The latest shortage stems from the shutdown in February of the Sturgis plant, where the F.D.A. had discovered evidence of a potentially deadly bacteria called *cronobacter sakazakii*. The company launched a major recall that has resulted in gaping holes in formula availability. Federal agencies have been investigating several cases of illness in babies beginning last fall, including two deaths, though no definitive link to the formula has been established.

On Monday, the F.D.A. announced it would relax strict guidelines for imports of baby formula from other countries in an effort to restock shelves in the United States.

On Thursday evening, the White House announced that the Defense Department would help transport about 1.5 million 8-ounce bottles of formula from Zurich to Plainfield, Ind., for distribution in the United States. The formulas — Alfamino Infant, Alfamino Junior, and Gerber Good Start Extensive HA — are all for children who are allergic to cow’s milk protein, according to a White House statement.

The F.D.A.’s delayed recognition of the crisis-level shortage and its failure to tackle problems in the troubled formula plant prompted heated questioning of Dr. Califf during an F.D.A. budget hearing on Thursday.

Representative Rosa DeLauro, a Democrat of Connecticut and chairwoman of the House Appropriations Committee, pressed him to account for what she characterized as a sluggish response to clear problems at Abbott’s plant. She said a September inspection turned up evidence of the bacteria in finished formula but that the agency did not shut the plant down until February.

“It all begs the question of: Why did the F.D.A. not spring into action?” Ms. DeLauro asked. “Why did it take four months to pull this formula off the shelf? How many more illnesses and deaths were caused due to the F.D.A.’s slow response?”

Dr. Califf acknowledged to lawmakers that the agency was conducting an internal review to see if any errors were made. But neither he nor other administration officials could offer even rough estimates of how many tons of formula were set to be produced, where it would come from, or when it might make its way to consumers.

As baby formula supply began to fall in recent months, sales began to surge, most likely reflecting a wave of panic buying.

The shortage has spiraled into a health crisis for the administration and Congress.

The Senate on Thursday unanimously approved a measure that would expand what kind of formula can be purchased using benefits from the federal food aid program for women and babies. About half the formula sold in the United States is purchased with benefits from the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children, known as WIC.

“It’s rare that we have unanimity in the Senate on important measures — and I wish we had more — but this is one of these important issues,” said Senator Chuck Schumer of New York, the majority leader.

Without formally taking a vote, the Senate sent it to Mr. Biden for his signature a day after the House overwhelmingly passed the legislation. The fate of a separate \$28 million emergency aid package for the F.D.A. is more tenuous amid Republican opposition.

The Defense Production Act was created to give the government the power to ensure the flow of weapons during wartime.

During the coronavirus pandemic, President Donald J. Trump invoked it as a way of accelerating the production of personal protective gear for hospital workers and the manufacture of vaccines and other drugs to fight Covid-19. Earlier this year, Mr. Biden invoked the law to increase domestic production of critical minerals and metals needed for technologies like electric vehicles.

But analysts said the Defense Production Act may be an ill-suited tool, as the problems in the formula market did not originate with supply chain or transportation issues — a reality that Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg acknowledged in an interview over the weekend.

“A shortage of ingredients is not what led to the shutdown of the facility,” Mr. Buttigieg, himself the father of two young children, said on CBS’s “Face the Nation” on Sunday.

While formula makers have faced rising costs for their inputs, and a dearth of truckers and warehouse space has at times made it difficult for retailers to promptly restock their shelves, formula shortages stem far more from Abbott’s production problems — and safety issues and market concentration of the formula industry more broadly, analysts said.

Formula is produced in just a few huge plants in the United States, making the industry efficient but also vulnerable to a shutdown. The shuttered Abbott plant in Michigan is also responsible for a significant share of specialized formula for infants with allergies or other health conditions, for which there may be no close substitutes.

U.S. rules also make it difficult to import foreign formula, even from Europe. The U.S. levies a 17.5 percent tariff on most foreign formula, and companies that want to import products face onerous restrictions.

Removing red tape to allow foreign products into the country could help alleviate some pressures. But even then, it will be weeks before foreign formula can make its way to U.S. shelves and Abbott can restart production at its Sturgis plant.

Several congressional Democrats on Wednesday praised the president for taking action, saying the administration should do everything possible to resolve the shortages. Some Republicans, however, criticized the administration for misusing the act.

	“It seems the administration has no use for the word ‘defense’ in Defense Production Act,” Senator Patrick J. Toomey, Republican of Pennsylvania, said in a statement. He accused Mr. Biden of “misusing the D.P.A. statute every time there’s a temporary product shortage.”
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HEADLINE	05/19 Experts fear NKorea rejects Covid help
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/05/19/north-korea-covid-vaccines-aid-china-united-states-covax/
GIST	<p>With a suspected coronavirus case load nearing 2 million, next to no vaccines, sparse medical infrastructure and limited ties to the global health community, North Korea, which has long shunned outside help, appears to be on the cusp of a crisis.</p> <p>While it is too late to stave off the full force of the country’s first wave with a vaccine campaign, there are other provisions that could be donated, from powerful antiviral treatments to simple protective gear for health workers, that could slow the outbreak and protect the most vulnerable. But it is not clear whether North Korea would accept such offers of help, even in the face of disaster.</p> <p>Over the past two years, as the pandemic raged around the world, North Korea refused multiple coronavirus vaccine offers. Instead, the country, already hermetic by choice and isolated by sanctions, closed its borders in a bid to maintain a “zero covid” approach.</p> <p>The approach failed. Experts warn that the country’s covid death toll could top 100,000, with the North Korean population of 25 million providing fertile ground for new variants.</p> <p>By most accounts close to entirely unvaccinated, North Korea faces incredible risks from the fast-spreading BA.2 subvariant of omicron identified in the country. While vaccines may have helped prevent a crisis of this scale, they cannot be administered quickly and widely enough to stop it once it begins.</p> <p>Joshua Pollack, a senior research associate at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey and co-author of a December paper that called for the immediate supply of pandemic aid to North Korea, said it “appears to be too late for a mass vaccination campaign to soften the blow from omicron.”</p> <p>Instead, Pollack and his co-author Ferenc Dalnoki-Veress told The Washington Post, the United States and other nations need to focus on getting other supplies to North Korea — including antiviral drugs such as the Pfizer-produced Paxlovid.</p> <p>“Show them that the American public cares what happens to the people of North Korea regardless of what the regime says,” Dalnoki-Veress, a scientist-in-residence at Middlebury College, said in an email.</p> <p>“There’s no good option,” said J. Stephen Morrison, director of the Global Health Policy Center at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. “But there are things that can be done that can begin to ameliorate some of the worse consequences if they’re done quickly.”</p> <p>North Korea’s pattern of rejecting aid — as well as its recent missile launches ahead of an upcoming visit to the region by President Biden — complicates attempts to supply the country. White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan warned Wednesday of the possibility of a nuclear test, a missile test or both around the trip to South Korea and Japan.</p> <p>Last year, Pyongyang was offered shipments of AstraZeneca vaccines by Covax, the World Health Organization-backed program for getting vaccine doses to countries that wouldn’t otherwise afford them.</p> <p>A spokesperson for Gavi, the nonprofit that procures and distributes vaccines for Covax, said that “no formal requests” for coronavirus vaccines or other aid have been received from North Korea.</p>

Bilateral requests have also been refused. A South Korean official said Thursday that, for the third day in a row, North Korean officials have given no indication of whether they would accept an offer of aid from Seoul.

A senior U.S. administration official said that the United States has no plan to share vaccines with North Korea, though 1 billion Pfizer doses that Washington had purchased for Covax could be used if the organization wished and received a green light.

The official, speaking on the condition of anonymity because of government rules, added that North Korea was “continuing to exploit its own citizens and divert resources from the country’s people to build up its unlawful nuclear and ballistic weapons programs” while rejecting offers of aid.

One of the only countries that North Korea might accept help from is neighboring China. South Korean media reported this week that flights had resumed between China and North Korea for the first time in two years, probably carrying emergency supplies.

Speaking at a news conference in Geneva on Tuesday, WHO emergency chief Mike Ryan said the body “has no special powers to intervene” and called on neighboring countries to help.

A major outbreak in North Korea could be as bad or worse, in terms of deaths, as the first wave that hit the United States and Europe in the spring of 2020.

“If it’s already reached one and a half million cases in, what, a couple of weeks? It’ll double every week — more than double every week — unless you have mitigation events and try to clamp down,” said John P. Moore, a professor of microbiology and immunology at Cornell University’s Weill Cornell Medicine.

William Hanage, co-director of the Center for Communicable Disease Dynamics at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, said that firm estimates for the numbers of deaths per cases for BA.2 had not been fully established but appeared to be close to the ancestral virus that first struck in 2020.

That was about 0.5 percent — suggesting the death toll in North Korea could reach 125,000.

Hanage cautioned that there were numerous factors that could influence the case fatality rate. North Korea’s relatively young population, which has a median age of about 35, would probably be less likely to experience serious illness and death than older populations.

But many other factors are not in North Korea’s favor, according to Morrison.

“They don’t have vaccines. They don’t have any antivirals. They don’t have [personal protective equipment] and oxygen,” he said. “They’re not going to be able to protect their health workers. They don’t have ICU beds. They don’t have testing capacity or surveillance systems. They had extremely high malnutrition even before covid.”

“And then you’ve got the two-year border closing that has led to the depletion of any kind of supply chain into medical stockpiles,” he added. “It’s staggering.”

Hanage said that an out-of-control outbreak could lead to deaths in excess of the standard case fatality rate. “A complete loss of control will likely have some serious knock-on impact on health care,” Hanage said. “People will end up dying who otherwise would have recovered.”

The uncontrolled spread of BA.2 in North Korea could also lead to new variants, a risk that could reach beyond North Korean borders.

It is not clear why North Korea refused previous vaccine offers. Some analysts have pointed to national pride or the belief that imported aid could help spread the vaccines. Others suggest that North Korea was

	<p>holding out for highly effective mRNA vaccines, such as those made by Pfizer, though they do not have the ultracold storage network required for a mass vaccination program using those shots.</p> <p>Some hope that aid from the United States or other Western countries could lead to improved relations in other areas, but Dalnoki-Veress warned that explicitly tying help to another aim could backfire.</p> <p>“In the end, the regime will decide when to open up,” he said. “It is critical to have conditions in place to be able to move as quickly as possible when they do.”</p>
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HEADLINE	05/19 Florida record-breaking tourism resurgence
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/may/19/florida-sees-record-tourism-heels-gov-ron-desantis/
GIST	<p>Florida, where masks and most pandemic-related restrictions were shelved months ago, has seen a record-breaking resurgence in tourism this year as other major vacation destinations like New York and California continue to struggle.</p> <p>According to the state’s tourism agency, Visit Florida, the Sunshine State had 36.1 million visitors from January to March. That’s up from 26.16 million during the first quarter of last year and 30.4 million during the same period in 2020.</p> <p>It’s also up from the pre-pandemic 35.79 million who visited in the first three months of 2019. Christina Pushaw, a spokeswoman for Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis, said Thursday that more travelers started visiting when Florida decided to remain open last summer during the omicron surge.</p> <p>California and New York returned to heavy lockdowns during that same period, she noted.</p> <p>“People crave normalcy and Florida has felt 100% normal for at least a year — no mask mandates, no vaccine passports and no pandemic-related restrictions,” Ms. Pushaw told The Washington Times in an email.</p> <p>“Neither California nor New York is exceeding pre-pandemic tourism levels,” she added.</p> <p>Yannis Moati, CEO of the New York City-based booking service Hotels by Day, said there are likely other factors driving the trend.</p> <p>“I would challenge the idea that people are flocking to Florida because it’s more of an open state,” Mr. Moati told The Times. “I think the appeal is more a confluence of sunshine, family visits and sporting events like the recent Formula One event in Miami.”</p> <p>Mr. Moati noted that New York and California are also seeing bumps in travel, although the return has been less robust than what Florida is experiencing.</p> <p>“Everybody is seeing a bounce up in hotel bookings, sales and traffic from this time last year. It’s very relative because hotels everywhere in the U.S. have been hit by a massive demand,” the entrepreneur said.</p> <p>Visit California estimates that the Golden State’s total number of visitors will grow to 261.7 million this year from 213.5 million last year. That remains below the 286 million who visited California in 2019.</p> <p>In the Empire State, New York City’s tourism agency estimates that the Big Apple will not surpass its pre-pandemic tourism numbers until 2024. The agency says New York City had 66.6 million visitors in 2019, 32.9 million in 2021, and will have an estimated 56.4 million visitors this year.</p> <p>Meanwhile, Visit Florida says the Sunshine State welcomed 1.3 million overseas travelers during the first quarter this year, an increase of nearly 169% from the same period in 2021. That included 578,000 Canadian “snowbird” tourists, a 955% spike.</p>

	<p>“In addition to breaking more pre-pandemic records domestically, we are seeing an exponential rebound in Orlando as well as our international numbers, which we expect to continue in the months ahead,” Dana Young, Visit Florida’s president and CEO, said in a statement.</p> <p>In July 2020, Walt Disney World in Orlando was the company’s first property to reopen in the U.S.</p> <p>Visit Florida also reported a spike in air travel, with more than 39% of all visitors to the state traveling by plane—the highest share for air travel since the pandemic started in 2020.</p> <p>Meanwhile, Florida’s quarterly hotel demand in the first quarter passed pre-pandemic levels for the first time. The number of hotel rooms sold grew by 31.4% during the first three months of the year over the same period last year, with occupancy rates increasing about 24%.</p> <p>Mr. DeSantis said in a statement that the numbers defy earlier predictions that Florida’s tourism economy wouldn’t recover fully until 2024.</p> <p>“Florida’s tourism industry begins 2022 with incredible strength, proving that freedom-first policies will always win, especially when combating the inept economic policies coming out of D.C.,” the governor said.</p>
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HEADLINE	05/19 US, allies step up aid for Ukraine
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/may/19/us-allies-step-aid-embattled-ukraine/
GIST	<p>The Biden administration and its allies put their aid push for Ukraine into overdrive Thursday. President Biden approved a \$40 billion package of economic, security and humanitarian assistance and a second \$100 million shipment of lethal military equipment. The Group of Seven financial ministers agreed on a reported \$18.4 billion budget in support of Kyiv.</p> <p>In another move likely to anger the Kremlin, Mr. Biden personally hosted Finnish President Sauli Niinisto and Swedish Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson at the White House, doubling down on promises of U.S. security assistance just one day after the two Nordic nations submitted formal applications for membership in NATO. Russian President Vladimir Putin had repeatedly cited NATO’s expansion eastward as one reason for his decision to invade Ukraine nearly three months ago.</p> <p>“The president, prime minister and I committed that we’re going to work together to remain vigilant against threats to our shared security and deter and confront any aggression while Finland and Sweden are in the succession process,” Mr. Biden said during his remarks in the Rose Garden after the leaders met.</p> <p>“Nothing’s going to be missed,” he said. “We’re in once it is moving forward. I really mean it.”</p> <p>The Senate on Thursday passed the \$40 billion military and humanitarian aid package on Thursday on an 86-11 vote after a series of partisan fights delayed its consideration for a week. The final package was \$7 billion more than Mr. Biden’s original request. Overall, more than 30 Republicans joined with all 50 Senate Democrats to back the measure, while 11 GOP lawmakers voted against it.</p> <p>“Today the United States Senate will keep its promise to stand with the people of Ukraine,” said Senate Majority Leader Charles E. Schumer, New York Democrat. “This is a large package, and it will meet the large needs of the Ukrainian people as they fight for their survival.”</p> <p>Its passage comes just as the Pentagon has warned publicly it could exhaust its ability to deliver weapons and aid to Ukraine as early as this week.</p> <p>Specifically, the package earmarks \$11 billion for the Defense Department to send weapons from its stockpile directly to Ukraine and at least \$9 billion of the overall package will go to backfill weapons and</p>

resources the White House has already sent to Kyiv. Another \$6 billion is slated to shore up the Pentagon's main fund for arming Ukraine.

Nearly \$4 billion will be used to deploy troops and equipment to eastern European NATO nations in case Russia opts to expand the war.

Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky led the handful of conservative Republicans opposing the package, saying it was too much at a time when the economy is struggling.

"We cannot save Ukraine by dooming the U.S. economy," said Mr. Paul. "Isn't there a more fiscally responsible way this could be done?"

Mr. Biden is expected to sign the aid package next week. Separately, he also authorized on Thursday a fresh \$100 million in military assistance to Ukraine. The aid will include additional artillery, radars, spare parts, and other equipment, bringing total U.S. lethal aid sent to \$3.9 billion since Russia's invasion in February.

Despite the legislative delays, the Ukraine assistance received heavy bipartisan support in Congress.

"Support for our ally Ukraine is critical to the national security of the United States and our allies around the globe," Sen. Rob Portman, Ohio Republican, said in a statement. "It sends a message to the world's rogue dictators that America stands for freedom and with our allies in response to malign threats."

Also sending a message was Mr. Biden's decision to host the Finnish and Swedish leaders. The president said the two countries' bids should not be seen as a threat to Russia or any other power, but demonstrated the continuing relevance of the postwar Western military alliance.

"Let me be clear, new members joining NATO is not a threat to any nation," Mr. Biden said. "It never has been. NATO's purpose is to defend against aggression. Let no one make a mistake."

Russia's invasion of Ukraine, all three leaders said, means the post-World War II alliance has become increasingly vital to international security.

"There is no question NATO is relevant," Mr. Biden said Thursday. "And it is more needed now than ever."

Ms. Andersson, whose ruling party had historically opposed joining NATO, said the Russian invasion of Ukraine was "a watershed moment for Sweden."

"My government has come to the conclusion that the security of the Swedish people will be best protected within the NATO alliance," she said.

Turkey, a NATO member, has raised objections to the Swedish and Finnish bids, but both U.S. and NATO officials have expressed confidence this week that Ankara's concerns can be addressed.

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HEADLINE	05/19 Boston 'significant increase' Covid cases
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/nation/boston-reports-significant-increase-in-covid-cases-hospitalizations-massachusetts-lists-nearly-5000-cases/
GIST	<p>Boston Herald - Boston health officials on Thursday reported a "significant increase" in COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations amid the omicron subvariant wave, as nearly 5,000 new virus cases were recorded across the state.</p> <p>The 4,957 daily virus cases in Massachusetts was down from 5,576 reported cases last Thursday, but testing dropped 19.5% from last week.</p>

The omicron BA.2 variant has been spreading across the region, along with the subvariant BA.2.12.1 gaining steam in New England.

The state's daily average positive test rate has been climbing in recent weeks. The average positive test rate is now 9.35%, way up from 1.6% two months ago.

Boston is averaging 61 new COVID-19 cases per 100,000 residents per day, and community positivity is now at 11.5%. The city's community positivity rate was less than 7% a few weeks ago.

"We have noted a significant increase in both COVID-19 cases and in hospitalizations," said Bisola Ojikutu, commissioner of Public Health and executive director of the Boston Public Health Commission. "COVID-19 testing remains a critical tool to decrease the risk of transmission to others, particularly those who are older, immunocompromised, and unvaccinated. They remain at high risk for severe illness.

"We need to decrease onward transmission to others," she added. "Please test prior to gatherings, wear a well-fitted mask in indoor settings, including public transportation and get boosted if you have not been already."

State health officials reported 14 new COVID-19 deaths, bringing the state's total recorded death toll to 20,468. The daily average of deaths was much higher following the omicron hospitalization surge. The daily death rate is now eight.

COVID-19 hospitalizations had fallen dramatically after the omicron variant peaked. Now hospitalizations are rising again. There are now 866 COVID-19 patients across the Bay State after hospitalizations increased by 41 patients.

There are 74 patients in intensive care units, and 26 patients are currently intubated across Massachusetts.

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HEADLINE	05/19 NOAA: below normal 2022 cyclone season
SOURCE	https://www.hstoday.us/subject-matter-areas/emergency-preparedness/noaa-predicts-a-below-normal-2022-central-pacific-hurricane-season/
GIST	<p>There is a 60% chance of below-normal tropical cyclone activity during the Central Pacific hurricane season this year, according to NOAA's Central Pacific Hurricane Center and NOAA's Climate Prediction Center, divisions of the National Weather Service. The outlook also indicates a 30% chance for near-normal activity, and only a 10% chance of an above-normal season.</p> <p>For the season as a whole, 2 to 4 tropical cyclones are predicted for the Central Pacific hurricane region, which is located north of the equator between 140°W and the International Date Line. This number includes tropical depressions, named storms and hurricanes. A near-normal season has 4 or 5 tropical cyclones.</p> <p>"This year we are predicting less activity in the Central Pacific region compared to normal seasons," said Matthew Rosencrans, NOAA's lead seasonal hurricane forecaster at the Climate Prediction Center. "The ongoing La Niña is likely to cause strong vertical wind shear making it more difficult for hurricanes to develop or move into the Central Pacific Ocean."</p> <p>This outlook is a general guide to the overall seasonal tropical cyclone activity in the Central Pacific basin, and does not predict whether, or how many, of these systems will affect Hawaii. The Central Pacific hurricane season begins June 1 and runs through November 30.</p> <p>"Hurricane Iniki, a major hurricane, directly hit Kauai 30 years ago this year, and those impacted still remember the incredible destructive power Iniki delivered," said Chris Brenchley, director of NOAA's Central Pacific Hurricane Center. "Throughout the state of Hawaii, we must take note that the</p>

possibility of a hurricane in these islands is real. Heed the advice of public safety officials. Make a preparedness plan, and communicate it to your friends and family. Together, we can make our communities more weather ready and resilient.”

The Central Pacific Hurricane Center continuously monitors weather conditions, employing a network of satellites, land- and ocean-based sensors and aircraft reconnaissance missions operated by NOAA and its partners. This array of data supplies the information for complex computer modeling and human expertise, which are the basis for the Center’s storm track and intensity forecasts. These forecasts are made available to the public and media, and help provide critical decision support services to emergency managers at the federal, state and county levels.

New observations and improvements

NOAA’s fleet of earth-observing satellites grew more robust than ever with the [successful launch of the GOES-18 satellite](#) in March. This satellite will be used by forecasters to track and forecast tropical cyclones and other storms in the Pacific Ocean.

This summer, NOAA will [triple its operational supercomputing capacity](#) for weather and climate, allowing for more detailed, higher-resolution Earth models that can handle larger ensembles, advanced physics and improved data assimilation. This massive boost along with better science will allow for forecast model upgrades for years to come.

Check the [Central Pacific Hurricane Center’s website](#) throughout the season to stay on top of any watches and warnings, and visit FEMA’s [Ready.gov](#) for additional hurricane preparedness tips.

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HEADLINE	05/19 Revive I-5 project ‘full stride’ May 24 th
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/revive-i-5-project-hit-full-stride-starting-may-24/5ZRTLDCJDBHFPFN77BS2EJ25YA/
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — Starting May 24, the project to replace well-worn expansion joints on southbound Interstate 5 in Seattle, between Interstate 90 and Spokane Street, is expected to hit “full stride,” according to the Washington State Department of Transportation.</p> <p>The recent rain that has fallen in western Washington has delayed the project for the past two weekends.</p> <p>“We say it every week, so I’ll say it again — this work is weather-dependent. Here’s hoping it’s good enough to work,” said WSDOT communications consultant Tom Pearce.</p> <p>The construction work is weather-dependent due to the polyester concrete that crews are using to repair the highway.</p> <p>This type of concrete is more durable than typical concrete, but is also more susceptible to moisture and can only set properly if the weather is dry.</p> <p>KIRO 7 meteorologists are forecasting highs around 70 degrees on Saturday and Sunday. They are forecasting sunshine and clouds with a high of around 70 degrees for Monday.</p> <p>If weather permits, the work will continue through fall, giving the freeway the rehabilitation it needs. “This is really important work, as we replace expansion joints in this area. Keep in mind I-5 was built in the 60s. Thirty-two of the 35 expansion joints in this work area are original expansion joints,” said WSDOT spokesperson Amy Moreno.</p> <p>According to Pearce, the section of the freeway will see its first major work in more than 55 years.</p> <p>Last year, WSDOT replaced pavement in the area in the first stage of the Revive I-5 project.</p>

“Interstate 5 is vitally important to our local economy,” said WSDOT project engineer James Harper. “The freeway has held up well since it was opened in the mid-1960s, but some recent emergency expansion joint repairs are a sure sign this work is needed now. Repaving and repairing expansion joints will keep it in good condition.”

Drivers using southbound I-5 will see weeknight lane and ramp closures between 7 p.m. and 5 a.m. As for weekends, lane reductions will start in mid-June and run between 7 p.m. Fridays through 5 a.m. Mondays.

The weekend lane reductions are expected to [last for 16 weekends](#).

However, work will be halted on holiday weekends or during major events that draw large crowds to the stadium district or downtown Seattle, WSDOT said.

No work will be done on the following days:

- Memorial Day, May 28 to 30.
- University of Washington commencement, June 11 to 12.
- Independence Day, July 2 to 4.
- Labor Day, Sept. 3 to 5.

Each expansion joint takes roughly 55 hours to repair.

Drivers are being warned to plan ahead.

During construction, WSDOT says people who drive the closed sections of I-5 should consider using public transit, carpooling or traveling before 8 a.m. or after 8 p.m. on holiday weekends or during major events that draw large crowds to the stadium district or downtown Seattle, WSDOT said.

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HEADLINE	05/19 Evidence: Russia troops executed captives
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/19/world/europe/russia-bucha-ukraine-executions.html
GIST	<p>BUCHA, Ukraine — It is the last time the men would be seen alive: In two videos, Russian paratroopers march them at gunpoint along a street in Bucha, a suburb of Kyiv. Some of the Ukrainian captives are hunched over, holding the belts of those in front of them. Others have their hands over their heads. “Walk to the right, bitch,” one of the soldiers orders them.</p> <p>The videos, filmed on March 4 by a security camera and a witness in a nearby house and obtained by The New York Times, are the clearest evidence yet that the men were in the custody of Russian troops minutes before being executed.</p> <p>“Hostages are lying there, against the fence,” the person filming one of the videos says. He counts: “One, two, three, for sure, four, five, six ...” In total, nine people are being held.</p> <p>The men are forced to the ground, including one wearing a distinctive bright blue hooded sweatshirt.</p> <p>The video ends. But eight witnesses recounted to The Times what happened next. Soldiers took the men behind a nearby office building that the Russians had taken over and turned into a makeshift base. There were gunshots. The captives didn’t return.</p> <p>A drone video filmed a day later on March 5, also obtained by The Times, is the first visual evidence that confirms the eyewitness accounts. It showed the dead bodies lying on the ground by the side of the office building at 144 Yablunska Street as two Russian soldiers stood guard beside them. Among the bodies, a flash of bright blue was visible — the captive in the blue sweatshirt.</p>

A photograph of the executed men's bodies lying in a courtyard, some with their hands bound, was among a range of [images](#) that received global attention in early April after Russian forces withdrew from Bucha. Russian leaders at the [highest levels](#) have repeatedly [denied wrongdoing](#) in Bucha and described the images as a "[provocation and fake](#)."

But a weekslong investigation by The Times provides new evidence — including the three videos — that Russian paratroopers rounded up and intentionally executed the men photographed in the courtyard, directly implicating these forces in a likely war crime. Russia's foreign affairs and defense ministries did not respond to requests for comment on The Times's findings.

To uncover what happened to these men, The Times spent weeks in Bucha interviewing a survivor, witnesses, coroners, and police and military officials. Reporters collected previously unpublished videos from the day of the execution — some of the only evidence thus far to trace the victims' final movements. The Times scoured social media for missing persons reports, spoke to the victims' family members and, for the first time, identified all of the executed men and why most of them were targeted.

They were husbands and fathers, grocery store and factory workers who lived ordinary civilian lives before the war. But with restrictions on men leaving the country, coupled with a resolve to protect their communities, most of the men joined various defense forces in the days before they were killed. Nearly all of them lived within walking distance of the courtyard in which their bodies would later lie.

Return to Bucha

Russian soldiers first entered Bucha in late February, days after the war began, as they advanced toward Kyiv. Ukrainian forces were ready for them. They devastated Russian paratroopers at the front of the column in an ambush. Death notices and interviews with Russian prisoners posted by a Ukrainian YouTuber indicate that at least two paratrooper units — the 104th and 234th Airborne Assault Regiments — suffered losses.

The Russians withdrew and regrouped before returning on March 3, making their way to Yablunska Street, a long thoroughfare running through the city. Security camera footage obtained by The Times shows that the soldiers, like those who were ambushed in late February, were paratroopers. The video shows them driving vehicles — such as the BMD-2, BMD-3 and BMD-4 designs — that are used almost exclusively by the Russian Airborne Forces, according to experts from the International Institute for Strategic Studies and the Royal United Services Institute.

Security camera footage obtained by The Times showed Russian troops re-entering Bucha near 144 Yablunska Street on March 3 and 4.

The paratroopers patrolled the area, conducting house-to-house searches and operating in and out of 144 Yablunska Street, a four-story office building that the Russians turned into a base and field hospital.

About 300 yards from that base, at 31 Yablunska Street, Ivan Skyba, a 43-year-old builder, and five other fighters had been manning a makeshift checkpoint when the Russians returned. They had a grenade, bulletproof vests and a rifle between them, Mr. Skyba told The Times.

Warned via radio that Russians were back in Bucha and moving in their direction, they hid in the house beside the checkpoint, along with the homeowner, Valera Kotenko, 53, who had been bringing the fighters tea and coffee, Mr. Skyba said.

They were joined later by two more fighters, Andriy Dvornikov and Denys Rudenko, the man wearing the blue sweatshirt in the video. As the nine men hid, they texted and called loved ones. Mr. Rudenko messaged his best friend saying they were trapped. "Don't call. I will dial later," he wrote.

The men sheltered there overnight. By the morning of March 4, they realized that an escape was impossible. "We are surrounded," Mr. Rudenko wrote to his friend. "For now we are hiding. They are shooting from armored vehicles and heavy caliber."

Mr. Dvornikov, a delivery driver, called his wife, Yulia Truba, at 10:20 a.m., she told The Times. “We can’t get out. I will call when I call,” he said, before telling her to delete all of their messages and to prepare to evacuate. “I love you,” he said.

Around an hour later, Russian soldiers conducting searches found the men and forced all nine of them, including the homeowner, out of the house at gunpoint, Mr. Skyba said. The soldiers searched the men for tattoos that could indicate military affiliation and made some of them remove their winter jackets and shoes. Then they walked them to the Russian base at 144 Yablunska Street.

What happened next was described to Times reporters by Mr. Skyba and seven civilian witnesses whom Russian forces also rounded up from neighboring houses and held in a separate group yards from the captive fighters.

The witnesses said they saw the group of captives in the parking lot in front of the Russian base with shirts pulled over their heads. Yura Razhik, 57, who lives in front of the office building, said some had their hands tied. The Russian soldiers made them kneel down and then shot one of the men, Vitaliy Karpenko, 28, almost immediately, Mr. Skyba said. Mr. Razhik said he also witnessed the shooting.

Mr. Skyba and another captive, Andriy Verbovyi, were then taken inside the building, he said, where they were questioned and beaten before Mr. Verbovyi was shot and killed. The soldiers took Mr. Skyba back to the parking lot, where the other checkpoint guards were still being held.

At one point, one of the checkpoint guards confessed to the Russians that they were fighters, Mr. Skyba said, and that man was eventually let go. He is now under investigation by Ukrainian authorities, according to a local military commander and investigators; a government document seen by The Times specifies it is for “high treason.”

The soldiers debated what to do with the remaining men. “Get rid of them, but not here, so their bodies aren’t laid around,” one said, according to Mr. Skyba.

A courtyard execution

Two Russian soldiers took Mr. Skyba and the remaining captives to a courtyard on the side of the building, where the body of another dead man was already lying, Mr. Skyba said. The Times has identified that man as Andriy Matviychuk, 37, another fighter who went missing a day earlier. He was shot in the head, according to his death certificate.

Mr. Razhik and other witnesses being held outside the office building saw the soldiers lead the captives out of sight, they said. Then gunshots rang out.

“I was shot and I fell down. The bullet went into my side,” Mr. Skyba said. Photos he shared of his injuries show an entry and exit wound in the left side of his abdomen. A doctor in Bucha who treated his injury and a medical report reviewed by The Times confirmed the injury.

“I fell down and I pretended to be dead,” he said. “I didn’t move and didn’t breathe. It was cold outside and you could see people’s breath.”

Mr. Skyba lay there as the soldiers fired another volley at injured men who were still moving. He waited for about 15 minutes until he could no longer hear the soldiers’ voices. Then he ran.

Tetyana Chmut, whose garden borders the courtyard at 144 Yablunska Street, was among the residents held and later released by the Russians, along with her family. As Ms. Chmut dashed from her house to shelter in a neighbor’s basement later on March 4, she saw the bodies lying in the courtyard. A neighbor of Ms. Chmut’s, Marina Chorna, saw the bodies two days later when she emerged from her basement after the Russian troops occupying her house left.

The bodies of the men killed in the parking lot and inside the building were brought to the courtyard and, together with the six other victims, would lie there for nearly a month.

Evidence of a war crime

Four weeks later, after Russian forces had withdrawn from Bucha, Times reporters visited the scene of the executions. The wall and steps of the building were pockmarked by bullet holes. On the other side of the courtyard, scattered a few feet from where the bodies lay, were spent 7.62x54R cartridge casings, used in the Soviet-designed PK-series machine guns and Dragunov sniper rifles commonly used by Russian troops. The Times also found an unfired 7.62x54R round inside the building.

Other evidence left behind by the Russians points to two specific paratrooper units that may have occupied the building. Packing slips for crates of weapons and ammunition listed Units 32515 and 74268, corresponding respectively to the 104th and 234th Airborne Assault Regiments. Both units suffered heavy losses during the first Russian attempt to enter Bucha in February.

Investigators with the Security Service of Ukraine, or S.B.U., also provided The Times with an image of a patch recovered from inside the building bearing the emblem of the 104th Regiment and a roster of Russian soldiers recovered from the building. By searching Russian social media websites and other databases for each soldier's name, The Times found that at least five of the named soldiers had apparent links to the 104th Regiment. Others posted images of themselves holding paratrooper flags or wearing paratrooper uniforms. Some listed their location as Pskov, the city that is the headquarters for both the 104th and 234th regiments.

The execution of the captured fighters and the homeowner in Bucha "is the kind of incident that could become a strong case for war crimes prosecution," said Stephen Rapp, former United States ambassador-at-large for war crimes issues. The captives, having been disarmed and taken into custody by the Russians, were "outside of combat," under the laws of war, Mr. Rapp said. According to the United Nations and the International Committee of the Red Cross, such laws mean that prisoners must be treated humanely and protected from mistreatment in all circumstances.

In addition to the soldiers who shot the men, their commanders could be charged if they knew about the killings and failed to act to prevent or punish the conduct, Mr. Rapp said.

A desperate search

On March 4, after the men stopped answering calls and replying to text messages, their brothers, wives, mothers and friends began an agonizing search for them. Russian forces patrolled the streets of Bucha, so the relatives went online, pleading for information on social media.

"My nephew Denys (wearing a cap and glasses) stopped responding three days ago," Valentina Butenko, Mr. Rudenko's aunt, [wrote on Facebook](#). "Does anyone know anything about him?"

"Help find this man," Elena Shyhan wrote with a photo of her husband, Vitaliy. "His family is very worried, but we are not losing hope."

Meanwhile, the men's bodies remained in the courtyard. Once the Russians fled nearly a month later, the graphic image of the scene caught the world's attention — and that of the families scrambling to find clues.

Liudmyla Nakonechnaya, the mother of Mr. Dvornikov, saw the [photo on Facebook](#). Her comment read: "Oh my god! Oh my god! My dear son!"

Ms. Shyhan also saw the image. She [edited her post](#) from weeks earlier with a single line: "Stop searching. We have found him."

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SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/05/19/world/covid-19-mandates-vaccine-cases#covid-death-count https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/05/19/world/covid-19-mandates-vaccine-cases#us-covid-deaths
GIST	<p>It's difficult to comprehend and convey the toll of the coronavirus pandemic, so it may not be surprising that there's no single way that federal agencies, newsrooms or universities have arrived at such an immense number as one million known U.S. coronavirus deaths.</p> <p>Even the White House has acknowledged that there was no consensus method for tallying coronavirus data.</p> <p>When Jen Psaki, then Biden's press secretary, was asked last week how the administration would recognize the milestone, she said in part that "We look at the C.D.C. data and the Johns Hopkins data, and different news organizations evaluate it differently."</p> <p>Two days later, President Biden anticipated the moment at his second Covid-19 summit.</p> <p>"We mark a tragic milestone here in the United States: one million Covid deaths, one million empty chairs around the family dinner table — each irreplaceable," Mr. Biden told the summit, which was held virtually. That came more than a week after NBC News said the mark had been reached, but before some other tallies, including that of The New York Times, had crossed the threshold.</p> <p>The number is based on death certificates and other official records. But given how many diagnoses were probably missed in the spring of 2020, when testing was in short supply, and a lack of official guidance about reporting these records, that is certainly an undercount, experts say.</p> <p>Fewer than 310 known daily deaths, on average as of Wednesday, are now being reported in the U.S., according to data collected by The Times. At the height of the winter Omicron surge, there were more than 2,600 deaths a day in the United States, according to The Times's data, and in January 2021, the daily toll reached a U.S. peak of more than 3,300 a day.</p> <p>Since the beginning of the pandemic, The Times has had a team of journalists who are dedicated to collecting and publishing national coronavirus data. The Times developed a system that combines computer software and manual reporting to compile a unique data set which sometimes yields figures that vary slightly from those compiled by others.</p> <p>The crucial difference is in the combination of sources. Some news outlets draw their data exclusively from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention or from Johns Hopkins University. But The Times uses a broad variety of data sets — from the federal government, state governments, and many local and regional health departments. These sources can vary in their counts of cases and deaths for particular areas at particular times. For example, the state of California releases new data in the morning, but Los Angeles County typically updates its data late in the day.</p> <p>The Times's system of data collection also enables the newsroom to set aside figures that appear to be unreliable. That policy helps explain why The Times's national death count may differ from others. A crucial consideration for counting deaths by county is how a death's location is recorded. For example, several states such as Georgia and Tennessee include deaths of nonresidents in their state totals. The Times omits these deaths when possible to avoid double-counting deaths that occur away from the victim's home county and might be reported in both places.</p> <p>The Times considers that precaution an essential characteristic of its data set. But it means that some deaths may be omitted if their counties of residence are not clearly indicated, and as a result, the Times's count may differ from others' totals.</p> <p>By any reckoning, though, the scale of the nation's loss to the virus has been immense. In marking it last week, Mr. Biden said in a statement that the nation "must not grow numb to such sorrow."</p>

The United States officially surpassed one million known deaths from Covid-19 on Thursday, according to a [New York Times database](#), a cataclysmic outcome that only hints at the suffering of millions more Americans who are mourning their parents, children, siblings, friends and colleagues.

“Hopefully, the enormity of that number would spur us on to do whatever we can to make sure that we don’t have as bad a time in the coming months and years that we’ve had over the past two years,” Dr. Anthony Fauci, the chief medical adviser to the president, [told a Boston public radio station](#), WGBH, earlier this month.

[Some initial forecasts](#) put the number of Americans likely to die from the virus between 100,000 and 240,000, although officials warned that the death toll could climb if protective measures weren’t taken. The United States [reached 100,000](#) in May 2020, and [200,000 a few months later, in September](#).

The United States has a higher rate of infection than many other wealthy countries do, and the pathogen has continued to spread in a population afflicted by inequity, political divisions, a sometimes overwhelmed public health system, and an inconsistent array of policies and responses.

While Covid [stole lives from all strata of society](#), it magnified disparities, and some groups have been more vulnerable than others to infection, based on factors like sex, age, health care access, income and housing.

The virus arrived in the United States by early 2020, [setting off five distinct waves of new cases over the 26 months that followed](#). An unexpected early wave in the spring of 2020 was followed by another wave in the winter, when access to vaccines was still very limited; more Americans died in that wave than in any other period.

In January 2021, the country’s daily death toll peaked, with more than 3,300 deaths recorded each day in the United States. And then came new waves: Delta in the summer of 2021 and Omicron in the late fall and winter. Omicron caused illness that was milder for some, [though not for all](#); even so, it spread so swiftly and so widely that U.S. deaths surged again, and peaked in the first week of February, when more than 2,500 Americans a day were dying.

Now, in mid-May, Americans are still dying — more than 300 a day on average, as of Wednesday. Vaccines are readily available to nearly everyone other than young children, but even so, about 34 percent of people across the country have not been inoculated against the virus, and about 70 percent have received no booster, despite the vaccines’ effectiveness at preventing severe disease and death. “It’s reaching a point now with Covid, where some very obvious scientific truths based on clear-cut, very visible data are rejected by people,” Dr. Fauci said on WGBH. “When it gets in the way of the proper and appropriate response to a deadly outbreak, it becomes even more tragic.”

As of Tuesday, the average of new confirmed coronavirus cases surpassed 100,000 a day again, as Omicron subvariants have spread across the country. And those figures are thought to be undercounts, [especially since at-home test results often go unreported](#). Hospitalizations are on the rise, mostly on the East Coast; on average as of Wednesday, just over 22,800 Americans are in hospitals with the coronavirus on a given day, 27 percent more than two weeks ago.

While [each of the one million victims has a unique story](#), they leave behind a shared feeling among their loved ones, who say the lives of the dead have been pushed to the side in a country eager to get on with post-pandemic life. As it is, there is no national memorial to the people who have died, no shared remembrance, no communal place to gather, or to receive a nation’s sympathy. There is only a number, a horrifying number.

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HEADLINE	05/19 CDC: Pfizer booster for 5-11yr olds
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/05/19/world/covid-19-mandates-vaccine-cases#pfizer-vaccine-booster-kids

GIST

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on Thursday recommended a booster dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine for children ages 5 to 11. Children in this age group who received their last dose at least five months earlier are eligible to receive the additional doses immediately.

“Vaccination with a primary series among this age group has lagged behind other age groups, leaving them vulnerable to serious illness,” Dr. Rochelle Walensky, director of the C.D.C., said.

“With over 18 million doses administered in this age group, we know that these vaccines are safe, and we must continue to increase the number of children who are protected.”

The booster shot would be the third dose available for most children and the fourth dose [for some immunocompromised children](#).

A booster dose will offer children an extra layer of protection at a time when [infections and hospitalizations are once again rising nationally](#), scientific advisers to the agency concluded at a meeting on Thursday.

“It is sobering that we have experienced over [a million deaths in the U.S.](#) as a consequence of Covid infection,” Dr. Grace Lee, a pediatrician at Stanford University and chair of the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices, which sets recommendations for the use of vaccines, told other panel members. In November, the committee [recommended booster shots for adults](#) and in January did so [for children 12 and older](#).

Pfizer and BioNTech [reported in April](#) that in children aged 5 to 11, a third dose generated antibodies against both the Omicron variant and the original version of the coronavirus. In the trial, the children received 10 micrograms of vaccine — one-third of the dose given to adolescents and adults — in each shot.

As with the first two doses, the booster appeared safe, the companies reported. The most commonly reported side effects were pain, redness and swelling at the injection site as well as aches, chills and fever. Based on these data, the [Food and Drug Administration authorized the boosters](#) for children aged 5 to 11 on Tuesday.

About 70 percent of children in this age group have evidence of prior infection and may have some immunity as a result, Dr. Sara Oliver, a C.D.C. scientist, noted at the science advisers meeting.

But some evidence suggests that compared with vaccination, protection following an Omicron infection may be weaker and may not last as long.

“Prior infection can result in protection against reinfection for a time period, but it’s not 100 percent and likely decreases over time,” Dr. Oliver said.

The rise in pediatric hospitalizations during the Omicron surge suggests that immunity gained from infection is “not sufficient to provide a broad population-level protection,” she added.

The committee members debated whether to recommend that all children aged 5 to 11 “should” receive a booster or only that they “may” do so if their parents or health care providers deem it to be necessary.

Ultimately, the experts voted for the stronger recommendation, after several committee members argued that there was enough evidence suggesting that a booster dose was broadly beneficial in all age groups. Dr. Walensky endorsed the recommendation later in the day.

The extra dose may boost immunity to the current Omicron variants in young children. Studies have shown that two doses of the vaccine [offer virtually no barrier](#) against infection with the Omicron variant in children aged 5 to 11, although protection against severe disease remains strong.

In adolescents aged 12 to 17, two doses [offered little protection](#) even against hospitalization, but a booster significantly improved effectiveness of the vaccines.

Many parents have hesitated to immunize their children, in part because they are at much lower risk of severe disease than adults. Fewer than one-third of 5- to 11-year-olds in the United States have received two doses. The rates were lower among children from communities of color and low-income families and those living in rural areas.

But record numbers of children were hospitalized during the Omicron surge this winter. Nearly 4,000 children aged 5 to 11 have been diagnosed with a Covid-related condition called multisystem inflammatory syndrome during the pandemic. And some studies find that even children who have a mild illness may experience symptoms for months.

Covid-19 has been responsible for more deaths in children aged 5 to 11 than many other vaccine-preventable diseases, noted Dr. Matthew Daley, a senior investigator at Kaiser Permanente Colorado who heads the C.D.C.'s Covid-19 vaccine working group.

“Most parents accept vaccination for hepatitis A, meningococcal, varicella, rubella and rotavirus, even though deaths from these diseases are relatively rare,” he said.

At the science advisers meeting, Dr. Doran Fink, a deputy director for the F.D.A.'s vaccine division, acknowledged the “continued intense interest in the availability of Covid vaccines” for children younger than age 5.

He said that agency scientists were working to quickly review data on the Moderna vaccine's effects in the youngest children and were awaiting an application from Pfizer and BioNTech for their vaccine's use in this age group.

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HEADLINE	05/19 Title 42 affected migrants southern border
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/05/19/world/covid-19-mandates-vaccine-cases#migrants-border-title-42
GIST	<p>NOGALES, Mexico — Guadalupe Garcia crossed the border into Arizona with her 11-year-old daughter early this year, saying she was fleeing the brutal beatings she was suffering at the hands of her husband in Guatemala. The Border Patrol informed her that the United States was not open for asylum, and quickly put the pair on a bus back to Mexico.</p> <p>Five months later, Ms. Garcia and her daughter are still in the Mexican border city of Nogales, where she has found work at a restaurant. “We are waiting patiently for the U.S. to open,” she said on a recent day while filling orders for breaded chicken, enchiladas and tacos. Isilda was in a side room, making collages from magazine cutouts while her mother worked.</p> <p>San Juan Bosco, a shelter in Nogales, where the two are staying, has hosted many migrants for “five, six, even 10 months,” said Maria Antonia Diaz, a longtime volunteer. They are among tens of thousands of migrants lingering now in Mexican outposts — some who have taken jobs and rented apartments — waiting for the day, expected soon, when the United States fully opens its doors again to asylum seekers.</p> <p>The situation on the southern border is reaching a critical stage, according to federal and state officials who must accommodate the incoming migrants. Even before the scheduled lifting next week of the Title 42 public health rule, which has allowed the government to swiftly expel nearly two million migrants over the past two years, U.S. Border Patrol agents are encountering near-record numbers of people who either crossed on their own or were allowed to enter under various Title 42 exemptions.</p> <p>A total of 234,088 migrants crossed the southern border in April, topping March's 22-year high of 221,444, including a record 34,821 from Cuba and 20,118 from Ukraine. Lifting Title 42 could send an even bigger surge of up to 18,000 migrants a day, administration officials say.</p>

Though a federal court could temporarily halt the lifting of the public health order — postponing the day of reckoning — the key challenge for the Biden administration in the coming months is finding a way to deter the thousands of migrants who head for the United States not because of imminent threats of violence or persecution — threats which the United States is legally and morally obligated to address — but in search of jobs and a better future.

The official intent of Title 42, originally put in place under the Trump administration, was to slow the transmission of the coronavirus across the border. But it quickly became a powerful tool to slow immigration.

“There has never been a public health justification for using Title 42 authority in the battle to contain Covid-19,” said Wayne Cornelius, director emeritus of the Center for Comparative Immigration Studies at the University of California, San Diego.

“It was an obscure rule,” he said, “part of a multipronged effort to curb immigration to the U.S.”

The Biden administration has faced pressure from progressives to halt the expulsions and offer refuge to migrants who have legitimate claims of persecution in their home countries. It announced in April that the order would be lifted on May 23, with stepped-up plans to handle the new arrivals. But the large number of migrants predicted to cross in the weeks after the order is lifted has given pause, with even some Democrats advocating a go-slow approach.

Whether the policy is terminated next week or not, the United States is likely to see large numbers of people at the border for the foreseeable future. Turmoil around the globe is pushing migrants from Venezuela to Colombia; from Nicaragua to Costa Rica; and from everywhere near and far to the United States, where jobs are plentiful and prosperity and security seem within reach.

“Despite who is in charge and what policies are in place, there are global and regional forces that are going to lead to a continuation of migration,” said Eileen Díaz McConnell, professor of global migration at Arizona State University. These forces, she said, include climate change, economic and political upheaval, organized crime and domestic abuse, as well as the fallout from the global health crisis.

To handle the expected surge, the Homeland Security Department has unveiled a plan to focus new resources on the border, and Alejandro N. Mayorkas, the agency’s chief, has vowed that people without a legal basis for entering the country will face detention, deportation and other consequences that have been frozen during Title 42.

A new program to adjudicate border asylum cases within one year, rather than through the backlogged immigration courts that often take six to eight years, aims to discourage families with weak claims from journeying north.

“We are elevating the enforcement consequences we bring to bear on individuals who don’t qualify” to remain in the United States under the law, Mr. Mayorkas said during a visit to the Rio Grande Valley in Texas on Tuesday.

Any U.S. effort to prevent an overwhelming influx will depend on how well countries throughout the region, especially Mexico and Guatemala, manage their borders. Migrants from around the world travel through those countries en route to the United States. Mexico also plays a crucial role in deciding which migrants it takes back after their expulsion from the United States.

In April, more than four out of 10 border encounters by agents were with migrants from countries beyond Mexico and Central America’s Northern Triangle, an unprecedented share. And many have been allowed to enter the United States despite Title 42, which has excluded about 60 percent of the migrants who crossed the border since it took effect in 2020.

On a recent day, three busloads packed with male migrants, mainly from India, Senegal and Georgia, arrived at Casa Alitas shelter in Tucson within a three-hour span. Most of them had spent a few days in detention and then had been released with ankle monitors and orders to report to court later for deportation hearings.

Among those standing in line for assistance booking tickets to destinations across the country was Bassir, 30. He had flown from Senegal to Brazil, where he began a trek over land to reach the Mexico-Arizona border, he said. As he traversed the Darien Gap, a lawless stretch of jungle near the border of Colombia and Panama, bandits put a pistol to his head, and stole his watch and \$350. But after being intercepted by border agents and spending a few days in detention, he was finally looking at a chance to get a job in the United States, only wondering aloud, “How long will they keep this thing on my foot?”

A 20-year-old man named Preet Singh, headed for Los Angeles, said that his parents in India had paid \$16,000 to guides who ferried him through Europe and Mexico to the United States.

The numbers at the U.S. border reflect an escalating range of global tumult that increasingly has ended up at America’s door, said Adam Isacson, a scholar at the Washington Office on Latin America, who started studying the border in 2000.

“The world cratered during the pandemic,” Mr. Isacson said, “and this internationalization of crossers intensified.”

It is a trend unlikely to reverse. “There is little reason to think the world will become more stable, peaceful and prosperous in the next 10 years,” he said.

Because the rapid expulsions under Title 42 have enabled many single adults to make repeated tries until they succeed in eluding U.S. border authorities, administration officials have predicted that the total number of encounters by agents could decline after Title 42 is rescinded, despite the expected arrival of thousands of new asylum seekers who have been waiting on the other side.

But deterring large numbers of people from arriving with dubious asylum claims will be one of the central challenges in the months after Title 42 is lifted. Even if many claims are quickly rejected under the administration’s new fast-track policies, it will take time for word to get back that people are being denied protection and deported. And any messaging by the U.S. government will compete with that of a sophisticated smuggling industry that adapts quickly to shifting policies.

“It’s not just individual migrants; there is a system that responds to policy changes,” said Professor Díaz McConnell of Arizona State.

The only certainty is that the longer it takes for Title 42 to be lifted, the more migrants will amass on the Mexican side, creating a bottleneck that raises the potential for overcrowding and disruption when it ultimately ends.

A Mexican woman named Betzaida and her three children are among hundreds or more displaced families from Guerrero, a Mexican state convulsed by cartel violence, who have been waiting in Nogales for Title 42 to end. The family is renting an apartment and receiving assistance from the Kino Border Initiative, a nonprofit that provides meals, clothes and legal services to migrants.

“We never considered leaving Mexico. We had a stable life,” said Betzaida, who did not want her last name published out of fears for her safety. That changed, she said, when gang members, determined to seize their property, kidnapped and beat her husband unconscious. “All we want to do is disappear from Mexico so that they can’t find us,” she said.

Similar scenes are playing out in Mexican border towns from the Pacific Coast to the Gulf of Mexico.

	<p>Magdala Jean, 33, and her husband came from Haiti. They have been waiting with thousands of other migrants in the cartel-controlled border city of Reynosa, across from McAllen, Texas.</p> <p>In Port-au-Prince, they said, they felt unsafe amid a spate of shootouts by gangs that now control broad swaths of the capital. They also could not find jobs. Camping out in Mexico has been their best option, she said.</p> <p>“We want to wait, so that we’re not turned back,” she said.</p> <p>About 280 miles away, in the small town of Piedras Negras, Mexico, men, women and children in tattered clothes trickled into Primera Iglesia Bautista, a shelter in a nondescript building a block from the international bridge leading to Eagle Pass, Texas. They said that there were many people behind them.</p> <p>Israel Rodriguez, the pastor at the shelter, said that not only have more people been arriving in the past few weeks, but also they are coming from different countries than in the past.</p> <p>“People will continue coming. It’s the oldest story,” he said. “They have crossed mountains, lakes and rivers and they are not going to turn back because a law is lifted or added. Nothing stops them.”</p>
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HEADLINE	05/19 Russia economy grows ‘especially gloomy’
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/19/business/economy/russia-economy.html
GIST	<p>LONDON — After sanctions hobbled production at its assembly plant in Kaliningrad, the Russian automaker Avtor announced a lottery for free 10-acre plots of land — and the chance to buy seed potatoes — so employees could grow their own food in the westernmost fringe of the Russian empire during “the difficult economic situation.”</p> <p>In Moscow, shoppers complained that a kilogram of bananas had shot up to 100 rubles from 60, while in Irkutsk, an industrial city in Siberia, the price of tampons at a store doubled to \$7.</p> <p>Banks have shortened receipts in response to a paper shortage. Clothing manufacturers said they were running out of buttons.</p> <p>“The economic prospects for Russia are especially gloomy,” the Bank of Finland said in an analysis this month. “By initiating a brutal war against Ukraine, Russia has chosen to become much poorer and less influential in economic terms.”</p> <p>Even the Central Bank of Russia has predicted a staggering inflation rate between 18 and 23 percent this year, and a falloff in total output of as much as 10 percent.</p> <p>It is not easy to figure out the impact of the war and sanctions on the Russian economy at a time when even using the words “war” and “invasion” are illegal. President Vladimir V. Putin has insisted that the economy is weathering the measures imposed by the United States, Europe and others.</p> <p>Financial maneuvers taken by Moscow helped blunt the economic damage initially. At the start of the conflict, the central bank doubled interest rates to 19 percent to stabilize the currency, and recently was able to lower rates to 14 percent. The ruble is trading at its highest level in more than two years.</p> <p>And even though Russia has had to sell oil at a discount, dizzying increases in global prices are causing tax revenues from oil to surge past \$180 billion this year despite production cuts, according to Rystad Energy. Natural gas deliveries will add another \$80 billion to Moscow’s treasury.</p> <p>In any case, Mr. Putin has shown few signs that pressure from abroad will push him to scale back military strikes against Ukraine.</p>

Still, Avtotor's vegetable patch lottery and what it says about the vulnerabilities facing the Russian people, along with shortages and price increases, are signs of the economic distress that is gripping some Russian businesses and workers since the war started nearly three months ago.

Analysts say that the rift with many of the world's largest trading partners and technological powerhouses will inflict deep and lasting damage on the Russian economy.

"The really hard times for the Russian economy are still in front of us," said Laura Solanko, a senior adviser at the Bank of Finland Institute for Emerging Economies.

The stock of supplies and spare parts that are keeping businesses humming will run out in a few months, Ms. Solanko said. At the same time, a lack of sophisticated technology and investment from abroad will hamper Russia's productive capacity going forward.

The Russian Central Bank has already acknowledged that consumer demand and lending are on a downhill slide, and that "businesses are experiencing considerable difficulties in production and logistics."

Ivan Khokhlov, who co-founded 12Storeez, a clothing brand that evolved from a showroom in his apartment in Yekaterinburg to a major company with 1,000 employees and 46 stores, is contending with the problem firsthand.

"With every new wave of sanctions, it becomes harder to produce our product on time," Mr. Khokhlov said. The company's bank account in Europe was still blocked because of sanctions shortly after the invasion, while logistical disruptions had forced him to raise prices.

"We face delays, disruptions and price increases," he said. "As logistics with Europe gets destroyed, we rely more on China, which has its own difficulties too."

Hundreds of foreign firms have already curtailed their business in or withdrawn altogether from Russia, according to an accounting kept by the Yale School of Management. And the exodus of companies continued this week with McDonald's. The company said that after three decades, it planned to sell its business, which includes 850 restaurants and franchises and employs 62,000 people in Russia.

"I passed the very first McDonald's that opened in Russia in the '90s," Artem Komolyatov, a 31-year-old tech worker in Moscow, said recently. "Now it's completely empty. Lonely. The sign still hangs. But inside it's all blocked off. It's completely dead."

Nearby two police officers in bulletproof vests and automatic rifles stood guard, he said, ready to head off any protesters.

In Leningradsky railway station, at one of the few franchises that remained open on Monday, customers lined up for more than an hour for a last taste of McDonald's hamburgers and fries.

The French automaker Renault also announced a deal with the Russian government to leave the country on Monday, although it includes an option to repurchase its stake within six years. And the Finnish paper company, Stora Enso, said it was divesting itself of three corrugated packaging plants in Russia.

More profound damage to the structure of the Russian economy is likely to mount in the coming years even in the moneymaking energy sector.

Europe's vow to eventually turn its back on Russian oil and gas will compel Moscow to search further afield for customers, particularly in China and India. But the pivot to Asia, said Daria Melnik, a senior analyst at Rystad Energy, "will take time and massive infrastructure investments that in the medium term will see Russia's production and revenues drop precipitously."

Without sufficient storage capacity, Russia may have to cut its overall oil and gas production. Wells aren't like faucets, though, easily turned on and off. Cap one, and most likely it can never be used again.

"Some Russian spare capacity will be destroyed," Ms. Melnik said of the country's oil flow.

Anton Siluanov, the Russian finance minister, said that sanctions could cause as much as a [17 percent drop](#) in oil output this year.

Bigger slides are apparent in other sectors. Passenger [car production](#) was down 72 percent in March compared with the previous year.

In the industrial sector, which includes chemicals, oil, gas and manufacturing, the four-week average for the volume of imports is down 88 percent compared with early February, before the invasion, according to FourKites, which tracks supply chains. The volume of consumer-related imports is down 76 percent, making it difficult for Russians to buy tampons and cellphones, and for hospitals to get replacement parts and supplies for dialysis machines and ventilators.

In a survey of health care professionals in April, 60 percent of respondents said they had experienced shortages already. Among imported products, the items missing most included disposable gloves, catheters and suture materials.

For consumers, price jumps on basic goods have been so noticeable that a Twitter account has sprung up mocking social media posts in which Russians lament price increases on everything from Palmolive shampoo to nectarines. It is called But What Happened? and has nearly 44,000 followers.

A 26-year-old Moscow resident, who asked that her name not be used because of fear of reprisals, said the cost of imported fruit, like the bananas she puts in her oatmeal every morning, had skyrocketed.

"It's the product I buy every single time I go to the store, so I noticed immediately," she said. Her total grocery bill has shot up by about one third, she said.

In Irkutsk, the price of a box of tampons doubled from \$3.50 within weeks of the war's start, said a 23-year-old designer who earns \$450 a month and asked that she not be named. "For the same amount of money, I could buy a basket of good groceries, or a new T-shirt," she said, comparing prices before the war.

Outside of the country, Russia's economic prospects are also shrinking. Earlier this month, Fennovoima, a Finnish company that operates nuclear power plants, abruptly [announced](#) that it was terminating its contract to build a plant in the northern city of Hanhikivi with Rosatom, the Russian State Nuclear Energy Corporation. Mr. Putin signed the law that founded the company.

"We are extremely disappointed," Rosatom, which owns a third of the project through a Finnish subsidiary, said in a [statement](#): "The reasons behind this decision are completely inexplicable to us."

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HEADLINE	05/19 Agent misconduct recurring theme at FBI?
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/may/19/agent-misconduct-revealed-to-be-recurring-theme-at/
GIST	<p>FBI agents have a longstanding pattern of breaking rules on investigations and the bureau's efforts to solve them did not eliminate the problems, according to more than six years of internal reviews obtained by The Washington Times.</p> <p>The previously undisclosed data covering 2013 to 2019 documents more than 1,600 instances of broken rules on cases that involved investigations that do not require a warrant, the use of informants and undercover agents, and on sensitive matters involving people engaged in politics, government, the news media and religious groups.</p>

Mike German, a Brennan Center fellow who formerly worked undercover as an FBI agent, said the rule-breaking detailed in the audits are “the tip of the iceberg.” Mr. German, who left the bureau in 2004 and authored the 2019 book “Disrupt, Discredit, and Divide: How the New FBI Damages Democracy,” said the actual problem is likely far worse than the public knows.

“The culture is one of impunity,” Mr. German said. “The FBI leadership controls what gets approved and what doesn’t, regardless of the rules.”

The Times first reported in March about internal FBI audits in 2018 and 2019 showing misconduct by agents. These newly revealed documents portray a persistent pattern of rule-breaking since at least 2013.

It comes to light at a time when the FBI is under scrutiny for its role in advancing Trump-Russia conspiracy theories and for allegedly using counterterrorism resources to investigate parents who spoke out at school board meetings about mask mandates, coronavirus shutdowns or politicized school instruction.

The FBI told The Times it works to correct problems identified in the audits and makes changes when necessary.

Cato Institute senior fellow Patrick Eddington believes the audits show the bureau’s efforts are not working and depict a consistent pattern of noncompliance. He uncovered the internal reviews in litigation against the FBI for access to its records.

“Despite their claims of increased training, increased awareness, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, it continues,” Mr. Eddington said of the rule-breaking. “And I think that speaks to a system that is really, really badly broken.”

The more the FBI studied its employees’ work, the more problems it found. The bureau began a review of six field offices’ work beginning in 2013. When it discovered rule-breaking, the bureau quickly expanded the review to cover all 56 of its offices to study the issue nationwide. It soon found more than 200 “compliance errors.”

Its next [review](#) found 126 errors in 112 cases that were active during a two-month window in 2014.

“As the referenced audit reports show, the FBI has voluntarily conducted multiple internal audits over the last decade to ensure that personnel are complying with the administrative requirements of an investigation,” the FBI said in a statement. “If an audit identifies an administrative error, the FBI takes action to correct the error, ensures appropriate training occurs, and, where appropriate, institutes programmatic changes.”

Among the biggest problems in agents’ work is the unauthorized use of investigative methods, according to Mr. Eddington.

Such unauthorized methods may involve physical surveillance conducted for investigations that do not require a warrant, do not have approval and may examine people not accused of a crime.

For example, FBI auditors found 29 “compliance errors” involving unauthorized use of investigative methods across 28 cases in [a study](#) examining 2015 through June 2016. A majority of that rule-breaking occurred on assessments, which are examinations that do not require a warrant. Assessments may use surveillance without a court order, and may rely on human sources or other information. The assessments can lead to fuller investigations.

Thirteen errors involved physical surveillance for assessments without approval while three other errors involving physical surveillance on assessments had their description redacted.

The actual number of rules broken in this way is undetermined, but such rule-breaking also happened in other cases called “predicated investigations.”

The FBI did not answer specific questions regarding the misconduct involving unauthorized methods and physical surveillance for assessments.

“Looking back at the records from the audit concluded in 2016, the FBI addressed non-compliance findings with the applicable field offices and made sure all personnel were familiar with the applicable requirements,” the FBI said in a statement.

In cases where the FBI deliberately allowed its agents to break the law to catch criminals, the FBI broke rules as well. A 2018 FBI audit showed 82 compliance errors in 466 open cases including “otherwise illegal activity” for confidential human sources.

The FBI also broke rules for sensitive investigations involving people engaged in politics, government, the news media, religious groups, and other things. A 2019 FBI audit showed the bureau broke its own rules 747 times in 18 months on such sensitive matters.

Determining a trend in FBI wrongdoing is difficult when relying on the FBI’s internal data because its audits examine different cases for different periods in different years.

A 2017 FBI [audit](#) examining July 2016 through September 2017 found 114 errors when reviewing preliminary investigations and consensual monitoring, where the FBI intercepts a communication with the approval of one person involved such as an informant wearing a wire.

By contrast, a 2018 FBI audit studying cases open between September 2016 and July 2018 spotted 171 errors when looking at types of assessments not addressed the previous year, as well as cases with recorded interviews and cases involving “otherwise illegal activity” by confidential human sources.

Mr. Eddington thinks the snapshots revealed by FBI audits may warp the bureau’s ability to correct internal problems.

“When they don’t go back around and check on exactly the same things year in and year out in order to see whether or not the corrective measures have actually stuck, it cannot, I think, give anybody any sense of confidence that a lot of these problems that have been uncovered have remotely been solved,” he said.

Congress is working to get answers.

Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Richard J. Durbin, Illinois Democrat, and the committee’s top Republican, Sen. Chuck E. Grassley of Iowa, asked the inspector general to review FBI agents’ misconduct that was identified in the 2019 audit.

They also requested FBI Director Christopher A. Wray hand over an unredacted copy of the audit. The senators said the amount of documented wrongdoing by agents suggested a “pattern and practice of evading the rules.”

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To view the four documents, click below:

- [FBI Compliance and Mitigation 2013-2014](#)
- [FBI Compliance and Mitigation 2014](#)
- [FBI Compliance and Mitigation 2015-2016](#)
- [FBI Compliance and Mitigation 2017](#)

HEADLINE	05/19 WA lakes dangerously cold for water sports
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3479185/water-safety-washington-2022/

This weekend we're finally getting the spring weather we've waited for after a long winter — and that means Lake Union, Lake Washington, and the Puget Sound will fill up with boaters, paddleboarders, and others wanting to get out on the water.

But the King County Sheriff's Office Marine Unit dreads the annual spring warmup.

That's because as soon as the weather turns, people die on the water.

Derek Van Dyke, an education coordinator with the [Washington State Parks Boating Program](#), said in this part of the world, no matter how warm the air is, our water stays cold enough to be fatal.

"Any water below 70 degrees is cold water and can cause hypothermia and shock," he said. "Most of our bodies of water never get over 70 degrees in Washington state."

Even Lake Washington in August may be 72 on the surface — but a lot colder the deeper you go.

[Coldwater shock](#) causes your limbs to freeze up as your body focuses on protecting the vital organs. Within a few minutes, even a strong swimmer won't be able to move enough to get to shore.

In some people, cold water shock can cause the heart vessels to contract as their heart rate spikes up, which can lead to a heart attack.

Sergeant Rich Barton rescues people on the water with the King County Sheriff's Office Marine Unit — where he sees a lot of cold water shock.

"This is a very rapid onset — it can take seconds. You have basically 10 to 15 seconds of, 'Oh my God, I just went from 90 degrees to 50,'" Barton said. "And your body is in shock, it's going, 'What do I do?' So I gasp — I take that initial big breath. And then you ingest water. And then you go down."

And, of course if you're panicking, you'll use any energy you have that much more quickly.

Whether people fall or jump, whether they're on a yacht or a paddleboard, Van Dyke said there's one thing that the vast majority of people who die on the water have in common.

"Last year, we lost 13 people boating — the year before, 28," he said. "77% of our boating fatalities are not wearing a life jacket."

There are many reasons why people don't wear life jackets — besides just wanting to look cool and get a tan.

For one, life jackets are expensive. Good ones may cost almost as much as a paddleboard itself.

Also, people may not realize that it's the law. Everyone in Washington who is on a boat must at least have a life jacket on board — though the safest idea is to wear one at all times.

In fact, Lieutenant Alex Crolley, commanding officer of the Coast Guard's Station Seattle, said some paddlecraft users are legally required to wear them.

"One of the biggest segments where we see [no lifejackets] is the paddlecraft users," he said. "Those people on kayaks, paddleboards, canoes don't realize that they're not only required to have that life jacket on board, but also, if it's an inflatable device, be wearing it."

You are also required to have a whistle so you can get help if you're out too far.

If getting a life jacket is a problem for you, the State Parks Boating Program is here to help. Van Dyke says they have set up stands where you can borrow a life jacket for the day at 200 locations across the state

— including popular water sport spots like Deception Pass State Park and the beaches along Lake Washington.

“We want to make life jackets accessible,” Van Dyke said. “Not being able to afford a life jacket is not an excuse for not having one. We will get you a life jacket.”

Another big problem is a lack of education, especially for people using paddlecraft. Van Dyke said, unlike motorized boaters, paddleboarders and kayakers don’t need to take an exam and earn their boater education card before they get on the water — despite repeated [attempts by legislators to pass such laws](#).

“We have education mandatory for motorized boaters, but we do not have such a program for non-motorized,” he said. “That doesn’t mean that you should not be educated.”

So there are a lot of rookies out on the water with no experience — in fact, meteorologist Ted Buehner said paddleboard and kayak sales have shot through the roof the past couple of years, as the pandemic has had us all wanting to get outside.

“It’s a lot cheaper to do that, easy access, they’re selling right off the shelves as we speak, and you’re going to see a lot more of those kinds of vessels out on the water starting this weekend,” Buehner said. He predicts the large chain stores will be sold out of paddlecraft by Memorial Day.

“One other key point that’s different this year? Gas prices,” Buehner said. “You’re going to see a lot more human-powered boating this year than in the past because people just don’t want to pay that \$4-plus-a-gallon of fuel for those motorboats.”

Unfortunately, Buehner said, what is also unique about this year is the water is more dangerous than ever. “We’ve had a wet spring. We’ve added more snow into the mountains,” he said. “That snowmelt process, as we head into the summer, is going to keep those river temperatures in the 40s.”

Van Dyke with State Parks put that in perspective.

“Think about a swimming pool,” he said. “Most swimming pools, you jump in, and people think they’re cold. But they’re really above 80 degrees.”

What can help? Sergeant Barton said if you plan to get in the water, at least give yourself an idea of what you are in for.

“We tell people to splash yourself,” he said. “Get yourself wet. Actually splash your face and see what that effect is going to be with 58-, 60-degree water on a 90-degree day.”

But the best thing you can do is educate yourself.

The State Parks Boating Program website [has free resources](#) where you can learn the basics of boating and paddleboarding and quiz yourself.

State Parks is also piloting a boater education program for kids for the first time this summer.

The education process doesn’t have to be super involved — but Van Dyke says just putting in that little bit of time to learn the basics may end up saving your life.

“It’s not a toy, the water is cold, be prepared,” he said. “Know the weather before you go, know the water conditions before you go. Have the proper, legally-required safety equipment — the whistle, the life jacket. Wear your life jacket, and then don’t underestimate your skills.”

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SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/environment/april-rains-not-nearly-enough-to-overcome-northwest-drought-wildfire-risk-experts-say/
GIST	<p>Spring showers have helped alleviate drought and wildfire risks in Western Washington but large swaths of the Pacific Northwest remain dry, if not drier than usual.</p> <p>Last month was the state’s 10th-wettest April in 128 years, according to the U.S. Drought Monitor. And yet, more than half of Washington state is abnormally dry or experiencing moderate drought, nearly 25% is in the midst of severe drought and 3.9% is facing extreme drought.</p> <p>As summer approaches, the accumulating impacts of consecutive dry seasons are impacting snowpack, streamflow and water resources across the region.</p> <p>“To beleaguer the obvious, it’s been cool and wet in Washington,” Washington State Climatologist Nick Bond said Wednesday during a briefing on drought conditions in the Pacific Northwest. Bond said the chances of a statewide heat wave similar in magnitude to what the region saw last year are remote.</p> <p>“All that being said,” he added. “Mother nature has shown us what’s possible.”</p> <p>In the Columbia Basin, the last two years were some of the driest in state history. Extreme drought conditions continue through the lower basin and into Grant County and moderate drought persists across the upper basin and into northeastern parts of the state. The northern Cascades saw rejuvenating rains last month — which boosted snowpack and helped delay seasonal melting — but the same cannot be said of Eastern Washington and North Idaho, both of which saw below-normal precipitation.</p> <p>While Western Washington and Oregon are generally faring better than regions east of the Cascades, summer droughts and wildfires are becoming more frequent and intense due to climate change.</p> <p>About 68% of the Northwest is experiencing drought while 20% is experiencing extreme or exceptional drought, according to Britt Parker from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s National Integrated Drought Information System and the University of Colorado Boulder’s Cooperative Institute for Research in Environmental Sciences.</p> <p>“This wet and cool April is not nearly enough, though, to overcome long-term precipitation deficits and low snowpack,” Parker said Wednesday. “While April precipitation did aid in streamflow recovery and reservoir storage in some areas, it’s important to note that we still expect drought to impact much of the region including southern Oregon, portions of Eastern Washington and southern Idaho.”</p> <p>Despite unusually high precipitation in April, drought conditions of varying severity persist in central Washington, central Oregon and big stretches of Idaho.</p> <p>In parts of Oregon, last year’s spring was the state’s driest on record. Just last month, Idaho state officials issued an emergency drought declaration for all 34 counties south of the Salmon River.</p> <p>Dry conditions, high temperatures and stretched water supplies can blaze a pathway for wildfires. And in the Pacific Northwest they’re becoming a growing threat.</p> <p>Drought conditions reflect fire risks, Eric Wise from the Northwest Area Coordination Center said during the briefing Wednesday.</p> <p>The risk of significant fires in the Northwest is low through May, according to nationwide projections published earlier this month, but that risk is elevated in central Oregon through June and could expand into southwest Oregon and central Washington in July.</p> <p>In southern California, residents were preparing for an intense wildfire season when a coastal blaze emerged in Laguna Niguel. The fire — which sparked on May 11 and rapidly expanded to an area of 200 acres and destroyed 20 homes — was contained completely, Orange County officials announced Tuesday.</p>

	<p>In recent years, Western Washington residents have been smoked out during summer wildfire season by blazes on all sides in British Columbia, Eastern Washington, Oregon and California.</p> <p>The U.S. Southwest faces above normal wildfire risk through May and June but that could spread in to southern and western Colorado before recovering in July. Above normal fire risk is likely to expand by July to southwest Oregon and central Washington, and possibly most of the Northwest in August.</p> <p>More rain helped the region's snowpack which had been declining through the first quarter of the year. Snow-water equivalent was reported to have risen to or surpassed the average for Washington, central and northeastern Oregon by the end of April. Snowpack improved in southern parts of Oregon but they remain well behind normal for this time of the year.</p> <p>Heat waves and wildfires are compounded by drought — and vice versa — in a violent cycle that continues to threaten water resources across the country.</p> <p>“As we move forward with the changing climate,” said Oregon State Climatologist Larry O’Neill, “we do expect these sort of heat events to happen a little bit more frequently than they have in the past.”</p>
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HEADLINE	05/19 King Co. slow homeless service contracts
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/homeless/king-county-regional-homelessness-authority-is-months-late-in-paying-nonprofits/
GIST	<p>Nearly halfway through the year, the King County Regional Homelessness Authority has yet to finalize all its contracts with the nearly five dozen nonprofit organizations that provide homelessness services in the region. Without a finalized contract, organizations have been unable to bill the authority and receive payment, leaving most to front hundreds of thousands to millions of dollars in the first several months of this year, straining budgets.</p> <p>Seven percent of homelessness contracts for 2022 remain unsigned, and most of the finalized one were completed only in April or later.</p> <p>This is the first year since the authority took over administration of all of Seattle's and King County's contracts for homelessness services. It was a lot of paperwork to inherit: 320 contracts with 54 organizations totaling more than \$110 million. Those contracts cover the terms for services like emergency shelter and outreach.</p> <p>Homelessness authority leaders say they have worked as fast as possible, but have struggled with short-staffing, creating new management systems, unexpected emergencies and delays in budget allocations from the city. The mayor's office acknowledged the delay, but did not fully accept blame.</p> <p>“While it's possible this disbursement timeline may have contributed to the delay, it's unclear if this was the only contributing factor,” the mayor's office wrote in an email.</p> <p>The authority, which hired CEO Marc Dones in April 2021, was still understaffed as it built a new system to consolidate and manage those contracts. Its staffing shortages were exacerbated by the omicron surge of the pandemic and severe winter weather.</p> <p>“It was a pretty massive set of new things to do simultaneously,” said Chief Program Officer Peter Lynn, who oversees the authority's contracts.</p> <p>Ideally, nonprofit organizations would have had finalized contracts in January, said Mary Steele, executive director of Compass Housing Alliance. Then, they could have billed the authority in early February and received their first payment of the year by the end of that month.</p>

Instead, Compass still hadn't received reimbursement by the end of March.

"I was holding my breath there for a little bit," Steele said.

Compass Housing Alliance had to front more than a million dollars to pay its staff for the first few months of the year before it was reimbursed by the Regional Homelessness Authority. Steele said because Compass is a large organization, it was able to prevent any impacts on staff or services by drawing funding from philanthropy and other sources.

"But if it had gone another, you know, four to six weeks, it would have been a significant issue," Steele said.

The city sometimes took until March to finalize contracts, said Jamie Housen, a city spokesperson, at which point nonprofits could receive back pay for those months. But Housen said he didn't know if it had ever taken as long as it has this year.

Jerred Clouse, ROOTS Young Adult Shelter executive director, said he received a first check from the authority this week for services the nonprofit has provided since January. He said the shelter has been able to lean on cash reserves to stay afloat.

"It's a little stress inducing," Clouse said. "Particularly as a small agency, we don't have some of the reserves of some of the larger agencies. And honestly, sometimes it feels like it's harder to get people's attention as a smaller agency."

Clouse said it took weeks communicating with the authority to update simple language in the contract, and he wonders if the delay was exacerbated because his organization's contract is for hundreds of thousands of dollars, not millions. Lynn, of the authority, said the Regional Homelessness Authority has been prioritizing contracts for nonprofits that indicate they are seeing cash flow issues. That was the case for Compass Housing Alliance.

But Lynn said the authority has not prioritized larger contracts over smaller ones.

"In fact, it was quite the opposite," Lynn said. "One of our smallest providers was one of the ones that flagged cash flow issues right away. And we literally handwrote checks, and I walked them down."

The authority attributed a large part of the holdup to the city of Seattle for being late to finalize an addition to the authority's budget.

In December, the Seattle City Council had approved a 2.8% increase to the regional homelessness authority's budget as a one-time "appreciation pay" for service providers. The mayor's office acknowledged that the city did not disburse those additional funds to the authority until February due to an issue that was later resolved.

In hindsight, Lynn said, the authority could have finalized contracts without the amendment and adjusted them later.

Mayor Bruce Harrell's office said in a statement that he is standing by to assist the Regional Homelessness Authority if asked and pointed to the many other issues the new agency is facing.

"The city would expect that, as a newly established organization, the (Regional Homelessness Authority) may face challenges and delays as processes are initiated, systems are redesigned, and staff are hired and onboarded," the statement said.

King County Executive Dow Constantine also said that hiccups were understandable when trying to collate a complicated system for the first time.

The transfer of contracting duties was also prolonged because the setup of the authority was prolonged. The city was dissolving most of its department focused on homelessness issues in anticipation of the authority, but the new agency had no leader and no staff for more than a year after its creation. Once a CEO was hired and started growing the authority's staff, the city saw an administration change in the mayor's office, which meant both offices are now getting up to speed.

The Regional Homelessness Authority has nearly doubled its staff since the end of December, and its grants management team is now nearly fully staffed.

At the same time, nonprofit organizations have been experiencing their own staffing crises during the pandemic. Chief Seattle Club development director James Lovell said a nonprofit manager who has to fill in at the front desk has less time to focus on email communications regarding contracts, and situations like that "absolutely" contributed to how long it took to finalize their contracts with the Regional Homelessness Authority.

Some nonprofits are not particularly impressed with the authority's handling of contracts this year, but they are also understanding of the circumstances, and remain optimistic about their relationship with the new authority.

"I very much understand the challenges that the regional authority is facing right now and don't necessarily blame them for all that we are seeing," said Clouse, at ROOTS. "And it has had an impact. And it has been frustrating."

Seattle City Councilmember Andrew Lewis, who sits on the King County Regional Homelessness Authority governing committee, was harsher in his reaction to the delay in finalizing contracts.

"This is the most basic function of (King County Regional Homelessness Authority's) mission. This duty must come first. The agency is well-staffed and going forward must prioritize finalizing these contracts on time to meet the crisis," Lewis wrote in a text to The Seattle Times.

Homelessness authority programming officer Lynn said while the growing pains of transitioning management of contracts to the authority are temporary, there will be lasting gains from the consolidation of the region's homelessness system.

"My expectation is that this year's challenges with contracting are literally a one-time thing," Lynn said. "I have felt like though it has been a challenge, I think it has built relationships on both sides."

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HEADLINE	05/19 Don't take a rapid Covid test too soon
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/dont-take-a-rapid-covid-test-too-soon-how-and-when-to-swab/
GIST	<p>FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. — With COVID-19 cases on the rise, taking an easy-to-get rapid test can give you quick results.</p> <p>But the timing has become tricky.</p> <p>If you have COVID symptoms, such as fever, cough, congestion or a sore throat, test yourself immediately but know that a negative result may mean that you swabbed too early.</p> <p>"Most of the time, people are not getting a positive result until three to five days after they start to show symptoms," said Kathryn Pebanco, a nurse practitioner at the MinuteClinic in Plantation, Florida.</p> <p>Pebanco says you should repeat a rapid test a few days later if you get a negative result and have COVID symptoms or were in close contact with someone who tested positive. Meanwhile, take precautions, particularly if you are coming in contact with someone at high risk of severe disease if they get infected.</p>

Some researchers believe the virus is more heavily concentrated in your throat and mouth before it makes its way to the nose. Now there is some discussion of adding a throat swab to test kits to make them more accurate.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says, “Multiple negative rapid tests increase the confidence that you are not infected with the virus that causes COVID-19.”

If you’re positive, begin isolating immediately — even if you don’t have symptoms. False positives are rare.

How rapid tests work

Rapid tests work by detecting pieces of proteins on the surface of the coronavirus and only appear when you have enough of the virus in your system to be detected.

The tests, while easy to do at home, are less sensitive early in an infection and work best when you are showing symptoms and have a high viral load.

The darker the line is (and the quicker it appears within the minutes-long wait period), the higher your viral load and the more infectious you are at that point in time. A faint line, however, doesn’t mean you are not infectious, especially if you are feeling sick.

If a rapid test produces a negative result but you have a cough, fever or other symptoms, the CDC recommends you also do a PCR test. PCR tests will show a positive result up to two days sooner in the infection cycle because they are much more sensitive and pick up on low viral loads. PCR tests, however, are processed in labs and can take 24 to 48 hours to get a result.

Timing matters: If you don’t have COVID symptoms and want to make sure you are COVID-free before attending an event, you will want to take a rapid test right before. Taking a test the day or evening in advance of the event won’t work as well because your viral load can change.

Testing to end isolation

The CDC says you can end isolation after five days if you no longer have symptoms or if they are resolving. However, it may take much longer than five days to get a negative test result.

Everyone clears the virus from their system at a different pace.

“Probably after five days there is not enough virus to share with others,” said Dr. Aileen Marty, an infectious disease expert with Florida International University’s Herbert Wertheim College of Medicine. “But it isn’t going to be the same for every person. It is difficult to know when you are not infectious. If you get a negative, the odds are good you are done with shedding. If you are still positive, you may or may not be a risk.”

Epidemiologist Michael Mina looks at rapid tests this way, according to his Twitter: “If there’s enough virus to detect, there’s enough virus to infect.”

Marty suggests wearing a mask for 10 days after symptoms begin or after receiving a positive result.

Research shows that by Day 11, it’s safe to conclude you no longer are infectious, regardless of what the test shows.

With nearly dozens of antigen rapid tests on the market, Marty advises using one of the [49 that are FDA-approved](#).

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HEADLINE	05/19 Barreling toward recession next year?
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2022/05/19/recession-economy-markets/

The U.S. economy could be heading for a recession in the next year, according to growing warnings from banks and economists, as a sudden bout of pessimism hammers financial markets, which on Thursday spiraled further from recent highs.

Although major swaths of the economy — including the job market and consumer spending — remain robust, there are mounting worries that rising borrowing costs for consumers and businesses, after years of near-zero interest rates, could cause a sudden retrenchment. The Federal Reserve has raised interest rates by 0.75 percentage points so far this year, while officials are signaling more aggressive increases could be necessary to cool the economy. Continued uncertainty from the coronavirus pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine are adding to the uneasiness.

Financial markets fell again on Thursday, a day after the Dow Jones industrial average suffered its worst drop of the year. The S&P 500 inched further into bear market territory — defined as a 20 percent drop from the most recent peak — after Wednesday's sell-off wiped out more than 4 percent of its value.

"Recession risks are high — uncomfortably high — and rising," said Mark Zandi, chief economist at Moody's Analytics. "For the economy to navigate through without suffering a downturn, we need some very deft policymaking from the Fed and a bit of luck."

This week alone, former Goldman Sachs chief executive Lloyd Blankfein warned of a ["very, very high risk"](#) of recession; Wells Fargo CEO Charlie Scharf said there was ["no question"](#) that the U.S. economy is heading toward a downturn; and former Fed chair Ben Bernanke cautioned that the country could be [poised for "stagflation"](#) — a slowing economy combined with high inflation.

Those concerns come amid a smattering of data that points to economic cooling, particularly in interest-rate-sensitive sectors that are already feeling the brunt of the Fed's promise to keep tightening monetary conditions. New home construction slowed in April. Mortgage demand continues to decline.

Some of the country's largest and most influential retailers reported disappointing sales and profits this week because of higher costs and overstocked [inventory](#) issues, engineered to avoid supply chain disruptions, [setting off a stock market meltdown](#). Walmart stock plunged more than 11 percent on Tuesday, its worst one-day loss in 35 years. On Wednesday, Target shares tumbled 26 percent, following a stunning 52 percent drop in quarterly profits, which executives attributed in part to cooling demand for big-ticket items such as TVs, kitchen appliances and outdoor furniture.

"While we anticipated a post-stimulus slowdown in these categories ... we didn't anticipate the magnitude of that shift," Brian Cornell, Target's chief executive, said in a Wednesday earnings call. "When we talk to our guests, they often express their concerns about a host of rapidly changing conditions, ranging from geopolitics to the high and persistent inflation they've been experiencing."

Goldman Sachs this week revised down its forecast for second-quarter U.S. economic growth, to an annualized rate of 2.5 percent, citing higher prices and continued supply chain disruptions. That follows an unexpected contraction in the first three months of 2022, when the economy shrank at a 1.4 percent pace, mostly because of a trade imbalance and a drop in inventory purchases.

International turmoil, including a risk of recession in Europe and China, is dimming the outlook for the U.S. economy. And a strengthening U.S. dollar — as rate increases make dollar investments more attractive — could dampen exports, raising the chances of a technical recession in which the economy contracts for two quarters in a row.

That fear of a souring economy as well as shifts in consumer pandemic spending habits have led some highflying tech darlings including Netflix and Peloton to announce layoffs in recent weeks. Twitter and Meta have paused hiring plans, while Amazon executives recently said the company was ["overstaffed"](#) after months of brisk hiring. National claims for unemployment insurance inched up to 218,000 last week, a four-month high although still near historic lows.

Meanwhile, inflation, which remains near 40-year highs, has become a central challenge for both the economy and the Biden administration. Higher prices for basics like food, energy and housing are straining Americans' budgets and clouding their view of the economy. Gas prices soared to yet another all-time high this week, with average prices hitting \$4.57 per gallon nationwide. A closely watched [consumer sentiment index](#) by the University of Michigan shows that Americans' views of their current finances and future expectations have fallen sharply in the past year.

Despite that gloomy outlook, Americans continue to spend heartily. Sales of clothing, cars and furniture all ticked up in April, contributing to a 0.9 percent increase in overall retail sales from a month earlier, according to Commerce Department data released this week.

"Near term, the U.S. economy is holding up rather well despite the trouble abroad and the high prices at the checkout stand," said Beth Ann Bovino, chief U.S. economist for S&P Global, who says there's a 35 percent risk of recession in the next year. "People are spending, businesses are still trying to hire. But there are certainly challenges ahead. The Fed's actions will slow the economy, but the question is whether they could also topple the apple cart."

A day after warning that slower growth and inflation are "having stagflationary effects," Treasury Secretary Janet L. Yellen said Thursday she is optimistic the central bank could contain inflation without causing a recession. But she acknowledged that the ability to do so was far from clear.

"I think it's conceivable there could be a soft landing. It requires both skill and luck ... I hope that's the case, but this is a very difficult economic situation," Yellen told reporters in Germany, citing economic shocks from the war and sanctions on Russia. "There's a lot going on. ... It's not a straightforward matter."

Even if the United States staves off a recession in the short term, some economists say the sheer pace of inflation, with prices up 8.3 percent in the past year, and the persistent supply-and-demand imbalances caused by the pandemic, and the policy responses to it, could snowball into an even more severe crisis down the line.

"Consumers are spending like crazy, businesses are going to need to rebuild their inventories, and a lot of workers are still flowing back into the labor market," said Jason Furman, an economics professor at Harvard University who served as an adviser during the Obama administration. "But all of this makes me worry about one or two or three years from now — because it might mean the Fed needs to raise rates even more, and it might mean you create an even bigger recession later."

Zandi, of Moody's, said rising gas and commodity prices from pandemic-related supply chain snarls and the conflict in Ukraine have added to the specter of an economic downturn. He now puts the odds of a U.S. recession in the next 24 months at about 50 percent.

"We're traveling very close to the edge," he said. "The housing market is the next thing that's going to roll over; the question is just how hard."

New home construction fell in April, led by a slowdown in single-family homes. Building permits, which offer a glimpse into future construction, also declined, according to data released this week by the Census Bureau and the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

"Home builder sentiment fell to the lowest level in two years in May," Yelena Maleyev, an economist for Grant Thornton, said in an analyst note. "Builders are seeing less foot traffic and expect sales to be softer as we enter the busy home-buying season."

That softening is already rippling through the economy. Major mortgage lenders across the country, including Wells Fargo and Better.com, have laid off thousands in recent weeks as a result of dwindling demand for home loans and refinancing.

In Alexandria, Va., mortgage lender Kevin Retcher said there is a discernible skittishness among potential home buyers. Refinances began tumbling late last year, around the time the Fed began signaling upcoming rate increases. In the months since, a combination of rising mortgage rates — now at [5.3 percent for a fixed-rate](#) 30-year mortgage, nearly double early 2021 levels — and sky-high home prices have begun deterring buyers, he said. At least three clients have gotten “cold feet” and pulled out of ratified contracts in the past two weeks, he added.

“There is an extreme sense of nervousness out there,” said Retcher, president of First Meridian Mortgage. “It’s rare to have people win contracts and then back out, but that’s what’s been happening.”

Other types of small businesses say they’re seeing a pullback in consumer demand, too, as customers grapple with rising costs. Aaron Mulherin, who owns a glass repair company in Marion, Iowa, said that while homeowners are continuing to pay for necessities such as fixing broken windows, they’re starting to think twice about spending on luxuries such as custom showers.

“Average, middle-class consumers are starting to hesitate,” Mulherin said. “Everything is getting more expensive, so they’re getting an estimate, then putting it off.”

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HEADLINE	05/19 Diesel’s 100% surge impacts farmers
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/business/diesels-100-surge-denies-farmers-their-lifeblood/
GIST	<p><i>Bloomberg News</i> - Farmers are grappling with surging diesel prices and an unsteady supply, forcing them to spend unprecedented sums on fuel and raising concerns about the autumn harvest.</p> <p>In the U.S., where corn and soybean producers are rushing to sow after rains and cold temperatures forced delays, filling a tractor tank daily now costs some farmers \$1,000 — twice what it was a year ago. And the most intensive part of the farming season is still ahead.</p> <p>“We’ve never experienced this level of price increase for farm diesel fuel,” said Iowa farmer Chris Edgington, president of the National Corn Growers Association. Cost per gallon has climbed to \$4.70 from \$2.20 a year ago, he said.</p> <p>In the U.S., with grain reserves shrinking and inflation ongoing, diesel is in short supply, especially on the East Coast. Many of America’s farmers are nonetheless well positioned for another year of profit as war and global weather challenges have extended the 2021 crop price rally. Wheat recently jumped to an all-time high and corn and soybeans are trading near records. Still, they worry prices will collapse while the cost for diesel and other key farm necessities stays high.</p> <p>U.S. diesel prices are the highest ever, with warnings of shortages, especially in the eastern U.S. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine tightened global supplies of the fuel. While the situation in the Midwest isn’t as dire, wholesale prices in Chicago are still up 75% from a year ago.</p> <p>“Diesel is the lifeblood of farming,” said Iowa corn and soybean farmer Ben Riensche, whose fuel costs have jumped to \$70 an acre from \$35.</p> <p>Fertilizer, grain and machinery parts can’t move efficiently through the system without diesel, which is also needed for his massive earth-moving equipment. In fact, diesel is only one fuel problem. Propane has nearly doubled in price from last year. It is used to heat farmers’ homes and power dryers during harvest.</p> <p>That’s likely to be significant this season for producers who are battling heavy rains and flooding in the U.S. northern states and Canadian prairies. Also, soaring gasoline prices at the retail pump may move even higher during the summer driving period.</p> <p>“The milk being hauled away, there’s a fuel surcharge on that,” dairy farm owner Jon Patterson said. “I don’t have a way to pass that on to the next person. Right now, the milk price has come up to help offset</p>

	<p>some of that, but what’s going to happen when fuel and all these other inputs stay high and milk price drops?”</p> <p>Patterson is investing in bigger equipment to pump fertilizer more efficiently and using GPS to avoid going over the same ground twice, wasting valuable fuel. Illinois farmer Matt Bennett, co-founder of commodities brokerage AgMarket.net, notes that producers with “any crop at all” should be able to absorb bigger energy costs with wheat futures in Chicago up 66% since the start of the year, corn futures 35% and soybeans 25%.</p> <p>“The big issue I see is when the pendulum swings,” he said. “I’m not sure when that is, but when commodity prices move lower, inputs are likely to remain high.”</p> <p>He’s been helping clients hedge the risk by buying New York Harbor diesel and natural gas futures over the last few months. “When transportation costs go up, they don’t come back down so easily.”</p>
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HEADLINE	05/19 Youth drug deaths up; fentanyl tainted pills
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/19/health/pills-fentanyl-social-media.html
GIST	<p>Shortly after Kade Webb, 20, collapsed and died in a bathroom at a Safeway Market in Roseville, California, in December, the police opened his phone and went straight to his social media apps. There, they found exactly what they feared.</p> <p>Webb, a laid-back snowboarder and skateboarder who, with the imminent birth of his first child, had become despondent over his pandemic-dimmed finances, bought Percocet, a prescription opioid, through a dealer on Snapchat. It turned out to be spiked with a lethal amount of fentanyl.</p> <p>Webb’s death was one of nearly 108,000 drug fatalities in the United States last year — a record, according to preliminary numbers released this month by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Law enforcement authorities say an alarming portion of them unfolded the same way as his: from counterfeit pills tainted with fentanyl that teenagers and young adults bought over social media.</p> <p>“Social media is almost exclusively the way they get the pills,” said Morgan Gire, district attorney for Placer County, California, where 40 people died from fentanyl poisoning last year. He has filed murder charges against a 20-year-old man accused of being Webb’s dealer, who pleaded not guilty. “About 90% of the pills that you’re buying from a dealer on social media now are fentanyl,” Gire said.</p> <p>The phenomenon has led to disturbing new statistics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overdoses are now the leading cause of preventable death among people ages 18 to 45, ahead of suicide, traffic accidents and gun violence, according to federal data. • Although experimental drug use by teenagers in the United States has been dropping since 2010, their deaths from fentanyl have skyrocketed, to 884 in 2021 from 253 in 2019, according to a recent study in the journal JAMA. • Rates of illicit prescription pill use are now highest among people ages 18 to 25, according to federal data. <p>Much as drug dealers in the 1980s and ’90s seized on pagers and burner phones to conduct business covertly, today’s suppliers have embraced modern iterations: social media and messaging apps with privacy features such as encrypted or disappearing messages. Dealers and young buyers usually spot each other on social media and then often proceed by directly messaging each other.</p> <p>The platforms have made for a swift, easy conduit during the coronavirus pandemic, when demand for illicit prescription drugs has jumped, both from anxious, bored customers and from those already struggling with addiction who were cut off from in-person group support.</p> <p>Lethal doses hidden in pills sold as something else</p>

Supplies of tainted pills, crudely pressed by Mexican cartels with chemicals from China and India, have escalated commensurately. Fentanyl, faster and cheaper to produce than heroin and 50 times as potent, made for a highly addictive filler. Last year, the federal Drug Enforcement Administration seized 20.4 million counterfeit pills, which experts estimate represent a small fraction of those produced. Its scientists say that about 4 out of 10 pills contain lethal doses of fentanyl.

The result is that new waves of customers are swiftly becoming addicted, said Dr. Nora Volkow, director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse. “When you are putting fentanyl in pills that are sold as benzodiazepines or for pain, you are reaching a new group of customers that you wouldn’t have if you were just selling fentanyl powder.”

In a two-month span in the fall, the DEA identified 76 cases that involved drug traffickers who advertised with emoji and code words on e-commerce platforms and social media apps. The agency has included a feature in its One Pill Can Kill public awareness campaign: [a poster called “Emoji Drug Code: Decoded,”](#) with images of drug symbols.

“There are drug sellers on every major social media platform — that includes Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Pinterest, TikTok and emerging platforms like Discord and Telegram,” said Tim Mackey, a professor at the University of California San Diego who runs a federally funded startup that developed artificial intelligence software to detect illicit online drug sales. “It’s an entire ecosystem problem: As long as your child is on one of those platforms, they’re going to have the potential to be exposed to drug sellers.”

At around 1:30 a.m. on Aug. 15, 2020, Zachariah Plunk, 17, a star high school football player from Mesa, Arizona, contacted a dealer through Snapchat, seeking a Percocet.

As footage from the family’s home security camera would reveal, the dealer dropped off drugs around 3 a.m. Zach went outside, swallowed a pill and fell to the curb. At 5 a.m., a 15-year-old neighbor found him dead.

To Wendy Plunk, Zach’s mother, the ease with which dealers can evade detection is particularly devastating. The man who sold her son the fatal pill remains on Snapchat, she said, adding, “I keep an eye on the guy. Every time he gets kicked off, he changes his name a bit and gets on again, with the same picture.”

Social-media sites take action

(In January, parents of children as young as 13 who had died from pills protested in front of the headquarters of Snap, the parent company of Snapchat, in Santa Monica, California, with signs accusing the company of being an accomplice to murder. One speaker was Laura Berman, a relationship therapist and television host. In February 2021, her 16-year-old son, Sam, bought what he thought was a Xanax through a Snapchat connection, ingested it and died at home of fentanyl poisoning.

Facing a barrage of criticism from law enforcement and grieving parents, social media platforms have been stepping up policing on their sites, shutting down dealers’ accounts and redirecting drug seekers to addiction services.

On Monday, the Ad Council announced a wide-ranging campaign to roll out this summer, funded by three tech companies — Snap, Meta and Google — to alert teenagers and young adults about the dangers of fentanyl. Social media platforms like Twitter, TikTok, Twitch and Reddit are expected to provide landing zones for the warnings.

Snap and Meta, the parent of Instagram and Facebook, report they are increasingly interrupting drug exchanges. Snap said it took action on 144,000 drug-related accounts in the United States from July to December last year. That figure does not include the 88% of drug-related content that was preemptively detected by artificial intelligence software, which monitors terms that could signify drug deals.

Now when Snapchat users search for “fenta,” “xanax” or other drug language, the results are blocked. They are redirected to an in-app video channel with content from nonprofit groups and the CDC that addresses “fentapills” — the dangers of purported OxyContin, Percocet, Xanax and Adderall.

According to Facebook’s latest community standards report, it took action on 4 million drug-related exchanges worldwide in the fourth quarter of 2021. Instagram took action on 1.2 million, figures which represent alerts from both users and preemptive detection technology.

On Instagram, one recent search for Percocet did set off an automatic warning and an offer of help. But it also yielded numerous results, including an account that posted photos of the pills and contact information, with phone numbers on the encrypted messaging apps Wickr and WhatsApp.

And when companies remove dealers from their platforms, many sellers simply leapfrog to another.

“We detect about 10,000 new drug-related accounts a month,” said Mackey, whose software company detects illicit online drug trafficking for private and public organizations.

Most drug seekers will not baldly search for a drug by name, he said. They may use a hashtag with a celebrity associated with it. Enterprising dealers troll comments for customers, inserting themselves in online exchanges among seekers of pain relief.

During the pandemic, drug use has surged as mental health among young adults and teenagers has deteriorated, studies show. Young people tend to eschew heroin, not only because of its addictive properties but also because of a skittishness about syringes, say experts in adolescent behavior. Pills, with the false imprimatur of medical authority, appear safer. Moreover, to their generation, prescription medications — for anxiety, depression and focus — have become normalized.

“By the time the kid goes to college, his friends all have prescription bottles in their backpacks; they’re used to sharing pills,” Ed Ternan said. “The drug traffickers know that.” In May, 2020, his 22-year-old son, Charlie Ternan, three weeks away from college graduation, bought what he thought was a Percocet for back pain from a dealer he connected with on Snapchat. Thirty minutes after ingestion, Charlie Ternan, 6-foot-2 and 235 pounds, was dead from fentanyl poisoning.

The Ternans formed Song for Charlie, one of many organizations of families who have lost children to fentanyl. Ed Ternan has met with federal officials and has connected Snapchat with digital and drug treatment experts. His group creates cautionary content for TikTok and Snapchat.

The rules of engagement in the war on drugs have shifted, Ternan said, adding, “It’s now about chemistry and social media distribution and encryption. We need different kind of generals, a more collaborative approach between Big Tech and the government.”

To fine-tune prevention messaging, Snap commissioned Morning Consult, a digital market research firm, to conduct a survey of drug knowledge. The results, from a random sample of 1,449 Snapchat users ages 13 to 24, underscore their vulnerability to misusing prescription drugs. They expressed feeling overwhelmed, anxious and depressed but also fearful of the stigma surrounding mental health challenges. “Coping with stress” was the top reason to turn to illicit pills, they said.

But only half the respondents overall, and 27% of the teenagers, knew that fentanyl could be in counterfeit pills. When asked to rate the danger posed by certain drugs, nearly two-thirds were likely to rank heroin and then cocaine as “extremely dangerous,” but scarcely one-third put fentanyl in that category. Overall, 23% did not even know enough about fentanyl to rank its danger level, including 35% of adolescents.

That ignorance is what drove Wendy Thomas, a substitute third-grade teacher from Sanford, North Carolina, to repurpose her grief over the 2020 death of her son from a counterfeit Percocet and use it to reach teenagers. With her nonprofit, Matthew’s Voice, she has written health class curricula about fentanyl

for high school freshmen and seventh-graders that are currently under final review by a large North Carolina school district.

It also motivates anguished parents like Elizabeth Dillender, who is Kade Webb's mother and the grandmother of his newborn daughter, Indigo Kade. "I'm not naive enough to think that social media is going away," she said. "We have to work in conjunction with social media to get the word out to these kids."

Dillender has taken her campaign to Spotify, where she has a fentanyl awareness podcast, and to social media platforms like TikTok and Facebook.

Recently, her podcast featured Laura Didier, another mother from Webb's hometown, Rocklin, California. A year before Webb died, Didier's former husband found their 17-year-old son, Zach, in his bedroom slumped lifeless over his computer keyboard. Zach had bought what he thought was a Percocet from a dealer on Snapchat.

"You think if there's a problem, you'll see red flags — their grades are dropping; their disposition and friends are changing," Didier reflected recently. "But that's old thinking about drug behavior. This can happen so quickly, without your ability to predict. I just don't want families to be complacent and think, 'It can't happen to us.'"

To underscore that message, at least one harm reduction network, the Santa Clara Opioid Overdose Prevention Project in California, has been promulgating the darkly instructive warning: #ExpectFentanyl.

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HEADLINE	05/19 Health officials: substantial Covid increase
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/18/us/politics/white-house-covid-briefing.html
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — Federal health officials warned on Wednesday that a third of Americans live in areas where the threat of Covid-19 is now so high that they should consider wearing a mask in indoor public settings. They cited new data showing a substantial jump in both the spread of the coronavirus and hospitalizations over the past week.</p> <p>Dr. Rochelle P. Walensky, the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, said that the seven-day average of hospital admissions from Covid rose 19 percent over the previous week. About 3,000 people a day were being admitted with Covid, she said, although death rates, a lagging indicator, remained low.</p> <p>More than 32 percent of Americans now live in counties with medium to high levels of virus transmission, compared with about 24 percent the previous week. Dr. Walensky said that local leaders and individuals in those regions should adopt — or at least consider — prevention strategies, such as masking in indoor public settings and more frequent testing.</p> <p>The warnings from Dr. Walensky and other federal health officials seemed somewhat at odds with President Biden's own stance. The attitude in the West Wing more closely mirrors that of most Americans, who have eagerly moved away from mask-wearing and other strategies to prevent infection.</p> <p>Mr. Biden no longer wears a mask in most settings, and is once again participating in Washington's political and social scenes. The White House still takes precautions, regularly testing the president and those in close contact with him, and aides say Mr. Biden adheres to C.D.C. guidelines.</p> <p>But he no longer treats the pandemic as his chief concern among many. Wednesday's Covid briefing at the White House was the first in six weeks. While he has spoken about the pandemic's enduring threat and toll, Mr. Biden has given far more speeches recently on Russia's invasion of Ukraine and on inflation.</p>

At the same time, a string of people in the president's circle have been infected with the virus. On Wednesday, officials announced that Xavier Becerra, the health and human services secretary, had tested positive, as did Ashley Biden, the president's daughter.

Mr. Biden says the shift in his tone is the result of the country's success. Many people are vaccinated, a fair number are boosted, and those doses, plus new antiviral treatments, have been warding off severe disease, officials say. But the new approach is also a recognition of the political reality. Many Americans have decided to accept the risk of infection to resume their normal routines.

Andy Slavitt, a former senior adviser to the Biden White House on the pandemic, said the nation's attention had shifted. The president "is managing a war overseas, the economy, inflation, infant formula and as these things go, the pandemic is now seen by the public as one more thing," he said. "Of all the things going on, most people don't perceive this to be the problem that it probably is."

The president's stance could backfire if the virus's latest surge continues to build, evading the vaccines and making more people seriously ill. Should that happen, it could look like a repeat of last summer, when the president declared "independence" from the virus ahead of the July 4 holiday, only to see massive waves of illness and death once the Delta and Omicron variants hit.

Experts say that administration officials — including the president — should also be doing a better job of preparing the public for a reinvigorated virus in the fall and winter, when people spend more time indoors. If people become complacent now, they say, forgoing booster doses or failing to vaccinate their children, they could pay a price then.

"The attitude is, 'We've got this, we're over it.'" said Dr. Eric Topol, a professor of molecular medicine at Scripps Research in San Diego. "People should be gearing up, they should be getting booster shots. But there is no awareness."

If the pandemic appears to be a lesser concern, that also makes it harder for the White House to make the case that it needs tens of billions in new funding from Congress to replenish its supply of tests, treatments and vaccines in time for the fall. The administration has said it wants to launch a booster campaign at that point, hopefully with vaccines retooled to work better against the latest version of the virus.

At the White House briefing, Dr. Ashish Jha, the new White House coordinator of the pandemic response, warned that if Congress failed to grant the administration's request for \$22 billion in new Covid funding, Americans would suffer come the fall.

He did not repeat an earlier administration claim that the nation could face 100 million infections next fall and winter. Instead, he said that projections from biostatisticians varied greatly, depending on estimates of how much of the population has developed immunity and other complex factors.

But he said that a scenario in which the nation had to face the virus without enough doses of vaccines and treatments would be "terrible," adding: "I think we would see a lot of unnecessary loss of life."

Dr. Jha said the current incidence of severe disease would be worse if not for Paxlovid, an oral treatment developed by Pfizer that helps prevent severe illness if taken soon after symptoms develop. Doctors are prescribing Paxlovid pills to about 20,000 patients a day, he said. That may help explain why the rates of hospitalization and intensive care patients are low relative to the jump in infections, he added.

Officials also warned at the briefing that far too many Americans are failing to take advantage of booster shots to bolster waning protection against infection, leaving themselves vulnerable to the coronavirus's ever more contagious incarnations. Dr. Walensky said 62 percent of those aged 50 to 64 have not received a booster in the past six months, nor have 57 percent of those 65 or older.

Despite the nation's weariness with mitigation measures, she said that in areas with high levels of transmission, mostly in the Northeast, "we urge local leaders to encourage the use of prevention strategies like masking in public indoor settings and increasing access to testing and treatment for individuals."

In areas with medium levels of transmission, including counties in nearly every state, people should consider wearing a mask in indoor public settings, avoiding crowds and testing themselves more often, especially before gathering with others indoors, she said.

Whether local leaders will heed C.D.C. recommendations is another matter. New York City is now experiencing a high level of transmissions, but Eric Adams, the city's mayor, said on Wednesday that he had no plans to bring back mask requirements.

"If every variant that comes, we move into shutdown thoughts, we move into panicking, we're not going to function as a city," Mr. Adams said at a news conference. He said the city was settling into a "new norm" instead, recognizing that the virus would keep on mutating.

In an implicit recognition that the pandemic is not over, the administration on Monday quietly let pass a deadline for lifting the public health emergency, which has allowed the government to take steps like offering Americans free coronavirus vaccines, tests and treatments; barring states from canceling people's Medicaid coverage; and expanding access to telehealth appointments. It has also allowed hospitals to get paid more for treating Medicare patients who have Covid.

As of Tuesday, the average of new, confirmed coronavirus cases in the United States surpassed 100,000 a day for the first time since Feb. 20, [according to a New York Times database](#). That figure is up 61 percent from two weeks ago. [Public health experts believe the true number is far higher](#), because many people are not reporting the results of at-home tests.

The big unanswered question, experts say, is whether the rise in cases that is already well underway will be followed by a commensurate rise in hospitalizations and deaths. While hospitalizations are rising, deaths have remained low. About 275 deaths have been recorded each day on a seven-day average, according to the C.D.C. director, but the number has actually dipped slightly in recent weeks.

"We could be entering a period where we have an increased number of cases but a substantially decreased severity of illness, so that we see fewer hospitalizations and many fewer deaths," said Michael T. Osterholm, director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota. "But as absolutely uncomfortable and unsatisfactory as this is, we just don't know what this virus is going to throw at us in the next 90 days."

That poses a messaging challenge for the White House, he said: "What we need to do is not whipsaw from, 'We're over,' to 'Oh my God, how bad it could be.' "

Dr. Ezekiel Emanuel, an oncologist, medical ethicist and University of Pennsylvania professor who led an effort to draft a new pandemic strategy called "The Next Normal," was more blunt in calling for the White House to improve its Covid communications strategy: "They need to step up their game."

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HEADLINE	05/20 Sticker shock: property tax assessments
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/property-taxes-homeowners-facing-new-property-assessments/
GIST	<p>Anne Van Donsel said she didn't quite believe it when her hometown of Burlington, Vermont, last year sent her a new property tax assessment stating that the value of her home had doubled — raising her property taxes by 20%.</p> <p>Her property taxes jumped to about \$12,000 a year, up from \$10,000, a bump she said is adding to the financial strain as inflation pushes up the cost of food and other necessities. While Van Donsel appealed</p>

the assessment, she was given only a small reduction in the value of her home, which didn't make a dent in her new tax bill.

"I hadn't planned on spending thousands of dollars more on property taxes for the year," said Van Donsel, 59, a state employee.

Such predicaments are the flip side of the surge in residential real estate prices, as county and city officials blast out new property assessments to homeowners across the U.S. The housing market surged during the [pandemic](#), sending the value of the typical U.S. home surging to \$344,000, or 37% higher than in February 2020 prior to the crisis.

Now, higher property taxes could add to the cost burden of both longstanding and new home owners, further crimping budgets at a time when inflation is at a [40-year high](#).

Cities and counties typically reassess property values every year or two, although some regions have gaps of several years between reassessments. That means homeowners are just now seeing the real estate boom reflected in their tax bills.

Some homeowners are now getting "sticker shock" when they receive new property assessments, according to John Whitehead, the property assessor of Knox County in Tennessee, which in April sent out new property assessments to its residents, its first in five years. Values in the county, which is home to the city of Knoxville, rose by an average of 40% in the new assessment.

"We had about 10,000 appeals" out of about 210,000 property parcels after the county sent out its new appraisals, he added. "A lot of them, their complaint was that it went up too much — some went up 50%, some 100% or more — and the complaint was it just went up too much at one time, and I understand that. It's the sticker shock."

Record property taxes

Average property tax payments hit [record highs last year](#) in some counties, according to an April report by Attom Data Solutions, a real estate data firm. Even so, property taxes have lagged home prices, with the former rising less than 2% last year while single-family home values jumped 16%, Attom said. That means property taxes could soon reflect the higher home valuations, according to the firm.

Some major cities and counties are now sending out new assessments, to the dismay of some homeowners. In Philadelphia, for example, residential values are now [31% higher](#) than during the city's last assessment three years ago; Milwaukee has seen an [average increase of 18%](#), while in Knox County home values are up 40%.

That could impact budgets for longstanding homeowners as well as the millions of first-time buyers who snapped up property during the pandemic. It also could be an unexpected cost for current house hunters, who are facing higher home prices as well as mortgage costs, which means the typical mortgage payment is more than 50% higher than a year ago.

Higher tax bill?

It's important to note that a higher assessment doesn't necessarily mean a bigger tax bill, said Richard O'Donnell of O'Donnell & Cullen Property Tax Consultants. A former tax assessor in Westchester County, New York, O'Donnell explained that the issue is whether your assessment — on a percentage basis — rose more than the town or county's average increase.

A homeowner in Knox County whose home rose 50% in value would end up with a bigger tax bill because their home outpaced the county's average 40% increase, Whitehead noted. Someone whose home rose less than 40% in value would see a reduction in their property taxes.

New assessments are typically designed to be revenue-neutral, meaning that the city or county can't gain revenue through an assessment, experts say. For instance, the new assessments impact taxes if a

neighborhood appreciates faster than the city overall. In that case, homeowners in that neighborhood are likely to pay higher taxes.

"Will some older homes be less marketable than newer homes, and will some areas appreciate at a greater pace? Absolutely, and that can create a shift" in how taxes are apportioned between property owners, O'Donnell said.

School budgets and taxes

Homeowners can certainly face higher taxes when their properties are reassessed, but typically the main cause of higher property taxes is school budgets, O'Donnell said. Because property taxes are the main source of revenue for funding local schools, an increase in educational budgets typically translates into higher tax rates.

"Most people don't participate in the budget process," O'Donnell said. "There are a number of work sessions and hearings to address the budget. As a local official, I've been to many. They have a 2,000 seat auditorium and a half dozen people there."

Homeowners in cities or counties that wait several years to reassess properties are more likely to face an unwelcome surprise when the new valuations arrive, he added. "The longer it goes between evaluation one and evaluation two, the larger fluctuations will be and the more upset people will be."

For Van Donsel, it had been 15 years since Burlington, Vermont, last issued property assessments.

"The value didn't seem believable to me. The thought that I could sell it for as much as they assessed it seemed ridiculous," she said, declining to give the newly assessed value of her home. But, she added, real estate values have only increased since then. "Maybe it could now."

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HEADLINE	05/20 Expelled, reentered: 12,000 migrant children
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/immigration-migrant-children-us-border-custody-unaccompanied-minors-2021/
GIST	<p>More than 12,000 migrant children reentered U.S. border custody as unaccompanied minors in fiscal year 2021 after being expelled to Mexico, typically with their parents, under Title 42 pandemic restrictions, unpublished government statistics obtained by CBS News show.</p> <p>Over a 12-month span beginning in October 2020, U.S. Border Patrol agents processed 12,212 unaccompanied migrant minors who had been previously expelled under Title 42, according to internal Customs and Border Protection (CBP) data obtained through a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request.</p> <p>The statistic provides a glimpse into one of the unintended consequences of the Title 42 policy: migrant parents opting to "self-separate" from their children to allow them to enter the U.S. as unaccompanied minors, who have not been subject to the pandemic-era border expulsions since November 2020.</p> <p>Government officials and advocates have previously described the "self separations" among migrant families during Title 42's enforcement, but the Border Patrol figure shows how widespread the phenomenon was last year. Unlike the Trump administration, the Biden administration declined to use Title 42 to expel unaccompanied minors.</p> <p>The data also show these self-separations and repeat crossings by migrant children were some of the factors that contributed to record arrivals of unaccompanied minors to the U.S. southern border in fiscal year 2021.</p>

Border Patrol reported processing 144,834 unaccompanied children in fiscal year 2021, a historic number that prompted the Biden administration to set up makeshift shelters at work camps, military sites and convention centers to alleviate dangerous overcrowding at border processing facilities.

While border arrivals of unaccompanied children in the current fiscal year have not reached the monthly records set last year, they've remained well above historical trends and are on track to come close to the nearly 145,000 Border Patrol apprehensions recorded in fiscal year 2021, [CBP figures](#) indicate.

Seven months into fiscal year 2022, Border Patrol has encountered more than 84,000 unaccompanied minors along the Mexican border, according to the CBP data.

Advocates for asylum-seekers said the self-separations among migrant families is one of reasons they believe the U.S. should discontinue Title 42, a public health authority first invoked by the Trump administration in March 2020 that has allowed U.S. officials to quickly expel migrants without hearing their asylum claims.

"Expelling families under Title 42 had forced parents to make the unbearable choice of keeping their children with them in danger or sending them alone to safety in the United States. No family should have to make that decision," said Lee Gelernt, an American Civil Liberties Union attorney challenging the expulsions in court.

DHS did not respond to questions about any steps the department has taken to address self-separations among migrant families. The Biden administration has been "well-aware of this phenomenon" and some officials have cited it as a reason to end Title 42, a U.S. official told CBS News, requesting anonymity to discuss internal deliberations.

This is not the first time migrant families have separated in response to a U.S. border policy. During the Trump administration, U.S. government shelters received [more than 700 migrant children](#) who had been previously sent back to Mexico with their parents to await their asylum hearings there.

After defending Title 42 as a necessary public health measure for over a year, the Biden administration in early April said it would stop the expulsion policy in late May, citing improving pandemic conditions, including the availability of vaccines.

But a federal judge in Louisiana overseeing a lawsuit filed by Republican state attorneys general [could block](#) Title 42's termination, set for May 23.

The Trump administration used Title 42 across the board, using it to expel more than 15,000 unaccompanied children until November 2020, when a federal judge blocked the practice. Soon after President Biden took office, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention formally exempted unaccompanied children from Title 42.

The Biden administration has mainly used Title 42 to expel single adult migrants, but it has also expelled some families traveling with children. To date, U.S. border officials have carried out 1.4 million expulsions during Mr. Biden's first 15 months in office, according to an analysis of CBP figures.

U.S. law requires border officials to transfer most unaccompanied children to the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) within three days of encountering them. HHS houses these minors in shelters and other facilities until they turn 18 or are placed with a sponsor, who is typically a family member.

As of Thursday, there were more than 9,000 unaccompanied migrant children in HHS care, according to department data.

Title 42 has also fueled soaring rates of repeat border crossings among migrant adults, many of whom are trying to re-enter the U.S. unlawfully after being expelled to Mexico. Border Patrol has recorded a 27% [recidivism rate](#) so far this fiscal year, compared to a 7% rate in fiscal year 2019, before the pandemic.

	DHS officials said the high recidivism rate would decrease when Title 42 is lifted because border officials will be able to refer more repeat crossers for criminal prosecution and deport additional migrants under the expedited removal process, which imposes a 5-year banishment from the U.S.
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HEADLINE	05/19 NYC investigates possible monkeypox case
SOURCE	https://gothamist.com/news/nyc-investigating-possible-monkeypox-case
GIST	<p>A patient at Bellevue Hospital in Manhattan is being tested for monkeypox, according to the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene.</p> <p>In a statement Thursday afternoon, Health Commissioner Dr. Ashwin Vasani said all appropriate isolation protocols are being followed as the department investigates the possible case.</p> <p>If the patient tests positive, the results will be sent to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for confirmation. The city's epidemiologists will also be following up with anyone who may have come in contact with the patient while they were infectious.</p> <p>This announcement comes after the Massachusetts Department of Public Health and CDC confirmed on Wednesday that a patient there tested positive for the disease.</p> <p>Monkeypox, which is in the same family as smallpox, is rare in the United States. Its symptoms can resemble the flu but include swelling of the lymph nodes and a blister-like rash on the face and body.</p> <p>"The good thing is that the vaccine for smallpox, and we still have a good supply of that vaccine, also protects against monkeypox," Dr. Celine Gounder, editor-at-large for Public Health at Kaiser Health News, told Gothamist.</p> <p>According to the CDC, monkeypox is transmitted through close contact between people and infected animals, infected people or materials contaminated with the virus. It can also be transmitted through respiratory droplets.</p> <p>"With this current outbreak, it does seem to also be spreading more easily than what has been our prior experience," said Gounder, who is an infectious disease specialist and epidemiologist. "There are aspects of this that are unusual, but again, I think we just need to wait and see, get a bit more information before we draw any real connection."</p> <p>She added that New Yorkers should pay attention to reports about the disease, but not be overly worried.</p> <p>"If you do happen to develop a rash on your hands, that is something that is concerning for something like monkeypox and is pretty unusual with other diseases," Gounder said. "And so, if you do get a rash on your palms, I would go see a doctor."</p> <p>The CDC said it is also tracking multiple clusters of monkeypox reported within the last two weeks in countries where it is not normally reported, including Portugal, Spain and the United Kingdom. It is unclear where those outbreaks originated, or if they are connected to the Massachusetts case, the CDC said.</p>
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HEADLINE	05/19 Firearm production, imports ramp up
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/us-firearm-production-imports-ramp-recent-decades-report/story?id=84843830

GIST	<p>The production of firearms in the U.S. has ramped up exponentially in recent decades with domestic manufacturing more than doubling and imports more than quadrupling, according to a new study by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives.</p> <p>The increases between the years 2000 and 2020 were fueled by the mass proliferation of the pistol as the most widespread firearm type and a 24,080% percent increase in manufacturing of short-barreled rifles, according to the ATF report. The number of firearms made in the U.S. increased by 187% and the number imported increased by 350% over the same period.</p> <p>The report comes as the nation is still reeling from a mass shooting that left 10 Black people dead in a Buffalo, New York, supermarket last weekend. The suspected gunman legally purchased the Bushmaster rifle used to carry out the shooting with some modifications currently illegal in the state of New York, sources familiar with the investigation told ABC News.</p> <p>The nation's patchwork of gun laws has been largely relaxed by Supreme Court decisions as well as state and federal legislation over the time period studied. Two Supreme Court cases that struck down local gun control ordinances in Chicago and Washington, D.C, paved the way for fewer restrictions on individual firearm purchases.</p> <p>The report also looked at the more recent adoption of untraceable firearms called "ghost guns" -- often assembled from parts bought online or made at a private residence.</p> <p>"One of the most significant developments affecting lawful firearm commerce and law enforcement's ability to reduce illegal access to guns in this period has been the proliferation of privately made firearms also known as "ghost guns," the ATF Los Angeles Field Office said in a statement on the report.</p> <p>The number of firearms recovered by law enforcement believed to be privately made increased 1,000% between 2016 and 2021, according to the report.</p> <p>The U.S. ranks first in the world for the number of firearms in the hands of civilians, according to a 2018 report by the nonpartisan Small Arms Survey. Yemen, Montenegro, Serbia and Canada round out the top five when adjusted for population size, although all have less than half the number of firearms per capita than the U.S.</p>
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HEADLINE	05/19 Monkeypox is 'very different' from Covid-19
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/monkeypox-cases-detected-us-europe-experts-caution-comparing/story?id=84831037
GIST	<p>Countries in Europe and North America are continuing to report more cases of monkeypox, but experts say the disease so far does not pose a serious risk to the public.</p> <p>At least 17 infections of the rare disease have been confirmed in non-endemic areas such as the United States, United Kingdom, Portugal, Sweden and Italy, and dozens of possible cases are under investigation in those nations as well as in Canada and Spain.</p> <p>Most cases occur when people encounter infected animals in countries where the virus is endemic -- typically central and western Africa as occurred with the outbreak's first case, reported in England on May 7 among a person who had recently traveled to Nigeria.</p> <p>However, none of the remaining eight cases in the U.K had travel history and did not have contact with the patient who had visited Nigeria, according to the U.K. Health Security Agency, suggesting there is some level of community transmission.</p> <p>Similarly, the first infection recorded in the U.S. was in an adult male from Massachusetts who had recently traveled to Canada, and now at least 17 cases are being investigated by Canadian authorities.</p>

Health experts stress the risk to the public remains low and most people don't need to be immediately fearful of contracting the illness.

"It is a virus in a very different class from COVID-19," Dr. Shira Doron, an infectious disease physician and hospital epidemiologist at Tufts Medical Center in Boston, told ABC News. "It predominantly lives in animal reservoirs so it sort of by accident gets to humans and it may cause sporadic illness or relatively small outbreaks."

Monkeypox is a rare disease caused by the monkeypox virus, which was first identified by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in 1958 in monkeys being kept for research.

The first human case was detected in 1970 in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

"It's important to note this is not a new virus," said Dr. John Brownstein, an epidemiologist at Boston Children's Hospital and an ABC News contributor. "This has been around for a long while. It's mostly endemic in parts of western Africa but you will occasionally see it in other parts of the world."

People are typically infected by animals through a bite or a scratch or through preparation and consumption of contaminated bush meat.

The disease can also spread from person-to-person via large respiratory droplets in the air, but they cannot travel more than a few feet so two people would need to have prolonged close contact.

"It transmits through large droplets, which don't travel very far, or through contact with lesions themselves or touching someone with bed linens or clothes or recent contact with lesions," Doron said. "It's not something you get without very close intimate contact, which is why it doesn't tend to cause outbreaks."

She added this transmission route is different from that of COVID-19, which is spread through small aerosols that can hang in the air for several minutes.

"Aerosols are not subject to gravity but large droplets, they get pulled to the ground," Doron said. "Also, monkeypox isn't an illness that is transmitted during the asymptomatic phase, which is what made COVID such a formidable foe."

Monkeypox generally is a mild illness with the most common symptoms being fever, headache, fatigue and muscle aches.

Patients can develop a rash and lesions that often begin on the face before spreading to the rest of the body.

"It starts out as spots, then small blisters like you'll see with chickenpox, then pus-filled blisters and then they scab over," Doron explained. "It's a long illness. It lasts a few weeks, but you can be contagious for several weeks and contagious until the blisters scab over."

ABC News confirmed Thursday the CDC is monitoring six Americans who were on the same flight as the British patient who tested positive after traveling to Nigeria.

"They will be followed by health officials for 21 days following their last possible contact with the ill traveler," the CDC said in a statement. "None of the six have any symptoms of monkeypox and the risk for them is very low."

Health officials said it is likely that more cases will emerge either in the U.S. or in other countries, but that Americans should not be concerned.

	<p>"We will find more cases," Brownstein said. "There is now heightened public awareness and clearly there will be more clinicians that will be able to recognize the symptoms."</p> <p>He continued, "But for now, there's nothing to suggest this will have anywhere near the same global impact as COVID-19. The risk to the general public is low."</p>
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HEADLINE	05/19 SPD racial misclassifications data reporting
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/community/facing-race/racial-misclassifications-in-seattle-police-reporting-missing-indigenous-people/281-9a4e049c-ff21-4fa0-b847-0907a06fff7e
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — The Urban Indian Health Institute (UIHI) released a comprehensive report outlining racial misclassifications in the Seattle Police Department's (SPD) data reporting, which they said has hidden the "full scope of the crisis" for missing and murder indigenous people in the city.</p> <p>The UIHI found 506 cases of missing and murdered indigenous women and girls across 71 cities in the United States in a 2018 report, but 153 of the cases were not entered in law enforcement databases at all.</p> <p>The disparities highlight a "data crisis" in databases, the UIHI said in a report released Thursday, which aims to strengthen American Indian and Alaska Native data within SPD.</p> <p>Seattle's City Council passed Resolution 31900 on Sept. 9, 2019 to create a partnership between police and Seattle Indian Health Board's to improve data collection within the agency.</p> <p>As part of the resolution, a police liaison started focusing on building relationships between SPD and native communities in the area.</p> <p>"Although correctly collecting and reporting race/ethnicity data does not stop the violence against Native people, it can help Native communities, public health authorities, and law enforcement agencies understand the scope of the problem and address it more effectively," the UIHI reported.</p> <p>The report outlined 13 recommendations for SPD to implement in its data collection.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ensure race and ethnicity are being captured accurately. 2. Collect the self-identified race(s) and ethnicity of Missing and Murdered Indigenous People. 3. Ensure the collection and analysis of multiple race and ethnicity categories. 4. Collect tribal affiliation, when appropriate, as determined by Tribal Consultation and Urban Confer processes. 5. Conduct a forensic review of MMIP cases. 6. Develop a codebook that defines current data elements in plain language. 7. Provide training on best practices for collecting and inputting demographic data. 8. Provide training on American Indian/Alaska Native communities, the MMIP crisis, and cultural humility. 9. Review existing trainings to increase and sustain compassion and empathy among SPD. 10. Conduct observation of non-emergency call takers. 11. Increase public awareness of the MP investigation process. 12. Develop a unit manual to set communication standards between the MP Detective, reporting parties, and tribal nations (if applicable). 13. Clarify investigation expectations of patrol officers and the MP Detective across SPD.
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HEADLINE	05/19 Russia ramps up spy activities in Seattle?
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/investigations/seattle-russian-spy-operations-ukraine/281-5504e5a2-5e78-4111-9b67-0c5739512038
GIST	SEATTLE —As war rages, Russia may up its spy game in Seattle

The [war in Ukraine](#) has exposed Russia's limitations in battlefield technology, and trade sanctions imposed by the west are further strangling Russia's access to all forms of tech goods.

Some experts believe that means that Russia will ramp up its spying operations in U.S. cities that are rich with technology firms, and that includes the Seattle area.

"I think that Russian espionage will be more aggressive," Russian journalist Andrei Soldatov told KING 5 in a video interview from London.

"Russian spies now believe they are in a war mode, meaning that more things are acceptable for them than before the war," Soldatov said.

"Seattle remains a prime location for espionage to occur," said Naveed Jamali, a former civilian double-agent for the FBI, who used to live in Seattle.

Experts say it's not just technology. western Washington's military bases, including the fearsome Trident nuclear submarines at Naval Base Kitsap and defense contractors like Boeing have valuable secrets.

"Russia's emphasis and priority on collecting intelligence, that's a fancy way of saying spying, has only increased as a result of Ukraine," said Jamali.

Within the last decade or so, several cases have revealed Russia's interest in stealing secrets in Seattle.

Mikhail Kutzik (alias: Michael Zotolli) and Patricia Mills (alias: Natalia Pereverzeva)

They were the private couple that lived on the fifth floor of the Belmont Court Apartments in Seattle in the mid-2000s.

Michael Zotolli and Patricia Mills had a son, held jobs and attended classes at the University of Washington's Bothell campus.

"If you tried to talk to them on the elevator or in the hallway, they were just always very evasive," said one neighbor in 2010, just days after it became public that the couple had been arrested and deported as Russian sleeper spies.

Using forged documents, Zotolli and Mills had created false identities and blended into American society. "There are Russian folks undercover, essentially masquerading as Americans," said Jamali.

Zotolli and Mills were rounded up in 2010 with eight other sleeper spies on the East Coast in a case the FBI called "Operation Ghost Stories."

For years before then, agents secretly recorded photos and videos of spies handing off money and flash memory cards, burying packages in "dead drops" for other spies to pick up later and meetings between spies and undercover FBI agents.

Videos show Zotolli making several trips to New York to meet with other Russian spies. One video from 2006 shows Zotolli in a New York park digging up a duct-tape bound package that another spy had buried two years earlier.

When arrested by the FBI, documents show that the façade cracked and both Zotolli and Mills admitted to the roles as spies before they were deported to Russia.

Seattle's Spy Base

In 2018, the federal government shut down what was believed to be a den of spying in the Pacific Northwest.

The Russian consulate in Seattle was an extension of the Russian embassy in Washington D.C., responsible for processing Russian visa applications, passports and other official documents.

Federal agents believed the Russian diplomats posted there were spies, and the Trump administration expelled them.

Experts say Russian diplomats are routinely military intelligence officers with high-level training in espionage. In “Operation Ghost Stories,” agents had recorded diplomats in New York handing off packages filled with cash to spies to fund their ongoing operations.

The U.S. never released specifics about the reputed spying at the Seattle consulate.

The Consul’s residence, a historic mansion called “Hyde House” on East Madison Street, still sits empty. King County property records show the building is still owned by the Russian Consulate.

However, the grounds are controlled by the U.S. State Department, which said in a statement to KING 5. “Under U.S. law, the Secretary of State can restrict access to such properties,” the statement read. “There has been no change in the status of the property in Seattle since March 2018.”

A Russian “asset” in Seattle

By the time Naveed Jamali had a brush with a suspected Russian spy in Seattle, he was already a well-known former “double agent.”

In the early 2000s, Jamali’s family in New York owned a business that supplied military textbooks and manuals to government agencies.

One day, FBI agents approached and informed the family that suspected Russian spies were regular customers at their store.

That was the beginning of Jamali’s relationship with the FBI, which blossomed into a plan to dangle the young Jamali before the Russians as a potential source ripe for recruitment.

“So, I became a double agent. And to make it very clear what my goal was, I was to have the Russian intelligence apparatus operating in the United States recruit me as a Russian spy,” Jamali told KING 5. “The whole time I was being recruited, I was really working for the FBI.”

Jamali says the plan was “crazy” and “unconventional,” but it worked. Three years later he reeled in a big fish, a Russian diplomat who was deported (he could not be arrested or charged because of diplomatic immunity).

Years later, Jamali wrote a book, “How to Catch a Russian Spy” and told his story on the lecture circuit. After he moved to Seattle in 2016, he told his story to a community group at the downtown Westin Hotel.

It was there he was approached by a woman who set off his well-honed spy sense.

“I fully believe that she was a Russian asset who had been directed to make contact with me and try to see if I would talk or get me in a compromising position,” said Jamali, who once served as an intelligence officer in the Naval Reserve.

“I turned it all over to federal officials,” he said, adding that he is unclear if the FBI acted on his tip.

“In a War Mode”

Russian journalist Andrei Soldatov is renowned for his inside reporting on Russia’s three spy agencies and is a senior fellow with the Center for European Policy Analysis.

His reporting is increasingly restricted in his homeland.

	<p>"That is one of the reasons why I left the country in September 2020," said Soldatov, from his London office.</p> <p>Soldatov said he does not have any specific information about Seattle, but he does expect Russia's "war mode" to raise the stakes for spies operating in U.S. cities with vibrant tech companies.</p> <p>"The United States is the main target. So, I would completely expect that they have a lot of people on the ground, and they can use them now," said Soldatov.</p> <p>Soldatov said the current economic sanctions against Russia should not be underestimated.</p> <p>"We had this situation before, back in the (era of the) Soviet Union. And the way the Soviet Union tried to fix this problem was to go to spies and ask them to steal some technologies from the West," said Soldatov.</p> <p>Soldatov said Russian president Vladimir Putin, a former intelligence officer, has spent decades building his spy machine.</p> <p>Seattle may be one place where it's already up and running.</p>
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HEADLINE	05/19 President Iceland visits museum in Ballard
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/nation-world/president-of-iceland-nato-seattle-ukraine/281-bf7d3d95-17a6-4cfa-8d29-ece00a3122c5
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — It's not often that the President of a NATO-member nation visits Western Washington, let alone during an international crisis.</p> <p>But that was the case on Thursday, with the visit by Iceland President Guðni Jóhannesson, who stopped by the National Nordic Museum in Ballard.</p> <p>Jóhannesson was the keynote speaker at a Nordic Innovation Summit, which included tech leaders from around the region, and cracked jokes about ancient Icelandic tales and how names are mispronounced in the Avengers movies.</p> <p>But he used the jokes as a way to dive deeper into the importance of native language, and why countries should be on a mission to enhance it and protect it.</p> <p>"There is certainly a political element to language and language policy, when you look at the conflict of Ukraine, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, where the argument among the leadership in Moscow is, well Ukrainian isn't really a language," he told a group of attendees. "Let the people of Ukraine decide whether Ukrainian is the language or not and you will get a different answer."</p> <p>Jóhannesson's tour through the west coast includes stops with tech giants Microsoft, Amazon, and Meta. He said, in an interview, that he's pitching them on making the Icelandic language easier to use on mobile devices and platforms.</p> <p>"We want to make sure in our digital ages, all our gadgets including our phones have Icelandic. So we can ask Siri, Alexa and others, all we need to know in Icelandic because otherwise, our language will not thrive."</p> <p>He continued, "This world can only move in the right direction if we advance diversity, if we allow cultures to thrive and we can only do that if we can speak a multitude of languages."</p>

	<p>The President of Iceland, a small island nation in the North Atlantic of just 350,000 people, also said he welcomed the addition of Sweden and Finland to NATO. The latter shares an 830-mile-long border with Russia.</p> <p>However, on Thursday, Turkey said it objected to the addition. NATO's chief said he was confident the issues could be overcome soon, as did Johannesson while standing in Seattle.</p> <p>"Iceland supports the decisions made by Sweden and Finland and the Nordic region sticks together," he told KING5. "We'll have to see how things develop, but the main point from an Icelandic point of view is we back the decisions made in Stockholm and Helsinki."</p> <p>Johannesson, who shared a stage with Russian President Vladimir Putin at an Arctic Summit in 2019, also made his country's opinion clear.</p> <p>"We fully support Ukraine as we have from the start and we want an end to the aggression," he told KING5.</p>
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HEADLINE	05/19 WA officials tackle spread of bird flu
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/state-agriculture-officials-taking-steps-to-stem-the-spread-of-bird-flu
GIST	<p>OLYMPIA, Wash. — The Washington State Veterinarian in the state's Department of Agriculture have asked for live market poultry sales to be stopped for the next 30 days as officials work to curb the spread of bird flu in the region.</p> <p>The move comes as seven counties in the state are now reporting cases of avian influenza.</p> <p>"Temporarily suspending poultry and waterfowl sales is recommended until detections across Washington slow down. This may extend until the end of June," veterinarian Dr. Amber Itle said in a news release. "Stopping these sales protects not only these backyard flocks but small and large commercial flocks as well," she added, "It is all about reducing risk. Bringing birds from different flocks together definitely increases opportunities for this virus to spread and impact more birds."</p> <p>Itle also asked people to watch out for animals that could transmit the virus.</p> <p>"We know that avian influenza is very unlikely to infect a cat, or a dog," Itle said. "We do know they can act as fomites, just like we can on our feet. They can carry that virus around on their paws."</p> <p>The Washington counties affected include Thurston and Pierce.</p> <p>Micha Ide owns Bright Ide Acres, with her husband, and their farm in Orting sells chicken and turkey meat.</p> <p>Their farm is located in Pierce County, which has recorded cases of the virus.</p> <p>Ide said they cannot risk bird flu coming to their farm.</p> <p>"If we did get it on our farm and it was confirmed and they would have to come out and euthanize all of our birds and then we couldn't have any more poultry on our farm for the rest of the season," Ide said. "It would really decimate a big chunk of our business."</p> <p>The farm has been forced to take safety precautions.</p> <p>"We have a boot wash station that anyone visiting the farm will use," Ide said. "If folks do have wild water fowl, I will probably not let them on to the farm, or ask that they wear boots that have never been worn at their farm if possible."</p>

	<p>"I think all of the confirmed cases have been backyard flocks. So actually, the people who should be paying the most attention to this are those folks that are just raising birds in their back yard for their own eggs and for fun," Ide said. "Those people often have less bio security in place."</p> <p>At the moment, there is not a big concern for the everyday consumer, but officials are taking steps now to try and keep the spread of bird flu down.</p>
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HEADLINE	05/19 Interim SPD chief applies for permanent job
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/interim-seattle-police-chief-adrian-diaz-applies-for-the-permanent-job
GIST	<p>SEATTLE - Interim Seattle Police Chief Adrian Diaz has officially applied for the permanent job, FOX 13 has confirmed.</p> <p>Diaz has been the interim chief of SPD since the fall of 2020 when former chief Carmen Best resigned.</p> <p>Mayor Bruce Harrell says the next police chief must be able to handle a variety of public safety issues.</p> <p>"Facing increasing crime, gun violence, and public safety issues, our next permanent chief must be able to respond to these challenges with urgency and innovation," said Harrell. "This comprehensive search will determine the leader best equipped to fill this challenging role and move our department forward."</p> <p>Harrell will appoint a search committee to assess candidates and recommend up to five individuals for a competitive examination.</p> <p>The top three candidates are rated by assessors and presented to Harrell for consideration. Once Harrell chooses a police chief, that person must be confirmed by the Seattle City Council.</p> <p>From January 2020 to March 2022, roughly 375 officers have left the department, many citing the lack of support of the city's political leadership in their exit interviews.</p> <p>A recent Seattle Safety Index put out by the Seattle Police Officers Guild says the department has 890 deployable officers, with a goal of 1,400. That goal reflects a department at its highest number of deployable officers and doesn't reflect recent reallocation of officer positions now performed non-uniformed city staffers.</p>
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HEADLINE	05/19 Drought will impact Northwest in summer
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/experts-warn-that-drought-will-impact-northwest-this-summer
GIST	<p>Drought is expected to impact much of the Pacific Northwest this summer, including areas in eastern Washington, southern Oregon and southern Idaho, according to climatology and water officials.</p> <p>A recent map from the U.S. Drought Monitor shows that about 54% of Washington is experiencing abnormally dry or drought conditions, with about 25% of the state in severe or extreme drought, the Yakima Herald-Republic reported.</p> <p>Washington and Oregon recorded above-normal precipitation levels and below-normal temperatures in April, which brought gains to snowpack in some areas. But state climatology experts predict it will be warmer and drier than normal in summer months.</p> <p>Washington Climatologist Nick Bond said Wednesday that precipitation over the last 90 days has been at or above normal across much of the state. Exceptions can be seen in Okanogan, Douglas and Grant counties in the north-central part of the state, where conditions remained on the dry side, he said.</p>

Bond said there are early indications that the summer will be on the warm side, but he said the chance of a severe heat wave is unlikely. The Northwest recorded record high temperatures in late June and early July 2021.

"It would be quite surprising to have anything of that magnitude come up this year," he said.

"There was a tremendous toll on human life in the Pacific Northwest with last year's heat wave, and I trust that we've learned some from that about what kind of actions can be taken to help people when those sorts of events come along," Bond said.

Recent precipitation in the Northwest has staved off the start of the fire season, but fire potential remains above-normal, according to Eric Wise with the Northwest Area Coordination Center. He said the potential is driven by drought conditions and projections of warmer and drier [weather](#) in coming months.

The area of most immediate concern is central Oregon, he said.

"As we head into the summer months, that concern starts to spread up into central Washington and southwestern Oregon," Wise said.

Washington State Department of Agriculture's Jaclyn Hancock said full water deliveries are expected for irrigation in the Yakima River Basin.

Jeff Marti with the Washington state Department of Ecology said some areas could see water restrictions in coming months, including irrigation areas in Okanogan, [Spokane](#) and Walla Walla.

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HEADLINE	05/19 Monitor: SPD progress in ending oversight
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/report-seattle-police-making-progress-toward-ending-federal-oversight-bias-force-concerns-remain/
GIST	<p>The court-appointed monitor overseeing mandated reforms to the Seattle Police Department has concluded the agency has fully complied with key requirements of a decade-old U.S. Department of Justice consent decree and predicts federal oversight of the agency will likely end next year, although significant accountability, use of force and biased policing issues still must be addressed.</p> <p>Antonio Oftelie, appointed to monitor SPD's compliance, praised the department's efforts to comply with the agreement, signed after the DOJ sued the department in 2012 in the wake of an investigation that found officers routinely used excessive force in making arrests, were poorly supervised and rarely held accountable, and showed disturbing evidence of biased policing.</p> <p>Oftelie found SPD has largely turned itself around in the ensuing decade, according to a 150-page assessment of the department's compliance filed with the court last week.</p> <p>Police uses of force declined 48% from 2015 to 2021, Oftelie found. Officers are also getting extensive training in crisis management and de-escalation techniques, according to the report, and stops and detentions — in the past frequently undertaken with little regard to the law — now almost always comply with constitutional guidelines.</p> <p>"Seattle has accomplished a great deal under the consent decree," Oftelie wrote in a foreword to the detailed report. "The vast majority of SPD officers have embraced a new mission and values; worked to create a service-oriented culture; expanded knowledge and skills on crisis intervention, de-escalation and less-lethal tactics; and committed to new policies and practices."</p> <p>Oftelie said the agency is "close" to getting out from underneath federal oversight."</p>

Still, the monitor said, there are areas of real concern that must be addressed before he can recommend to U.S. District Judge James Robart that the consent decree be dissolved. Oftelie said the unnecessarily violent reaction by the department to protests after the 2020 murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police badly eroded public trust that must now be restored.

“SPD will need to mend some deep wounds around these events and assure the community they are prepared to justly meet such challenges in the future,” the report stated.

Oftelie said SPD’s accountability system remains a major stumbling block in the path of full and sustained compliance with the consent decree.

Robart has singled out the Seattle Police Officers Guild for working against the three civilian-run “accountability partners” — the Office of Police Accountability, Office of Inspector General, and Community Police Commission — in achieving individual officer accountability for bad actions. [Robart three years ago ruled SPD had fallen partly out of compliance with the decree](#) over the city’s decision to accept a guild contract that protected officers from discipline.

The incident that brought the issue to a head was the [reinstatement through arbitration of a fired officer, Adley Shepherd](#), who had punched a handcuffed suspect in the face, breaking her cheekbone. Shepherd was eventually terminated [but has sued the department to get his job back](#).

Robart has said the city must address the guild contract, which will almost certainly be a topic during ongoing collective-bargaining talks between the city and SPD, [which has been without a contract since Dec. 31, 2020](#).

In his report, Oftelie said the monitoring team “will be tracking progress on collective bargaining agreements and advising the court on progress and challenges to upholding accountability.”

He said in an interview that accountability “remains a huge red-flag area” for SPD when it comes to convincing Robart to release the agency from the consent decree.

Oftelie also said the department must address evidence of racial disparity in policing, noting that data shows Black and Native American people “are disproportionately stopped, detained, and/or subjected to force by Seattle police.”

While the causes of such disparities can be complex and involve numerous social and economic factors, Oftelie said “the department must remain relentless in its efforts to root out racism and bias within its ranks.”

Oftelie also said the department has failed to adequately track race in its use-of-force and stops-and-detentions reporting despite having the ability to do so.

Even so, the disparities revealed by available data shows that Black people are more likely to be the subjects of force — including serious force such as police shootings — than white people.

Police are more likely to point a gun at a Black suspect than they are a white suspect, even though the data shows white people are more likely to be armed.

“Having a gun pointed at you is traumatic,” Oftelie said. “Over time, these practices erode the trust of the community.”

Oftelie’s assessment also notes that SPD staffing, which is not addressed in the consent decree, is sharply impacting the agency’s ability to comply with its requirements.

“One immediate and critical issue is the number of officers available for the community,” the assessment said, noting that the department currently has roughly 960 deployable officers, down 34% from its authorized staffing maximum of 1,443 officers.

The reduced staffing has put core functions like 911 response times under strain, hampered investigations and “all but shelved” proactive policing plans in individual communities.

Mayor Bruce Harrell said the monitor’s assessment makes clear “that SPD has made — and continues to make — meaningful strides since the implementation of the consent decree.”

“There remains work to be done, but I believe our department can deliver on my administration’s commitment — and our community’s demands — to stamp out racial disparities in policing and eliminate unwarranted use of force,” Harrell said in a statement.

City Councilmember Lisa Herbold, who chairs the public safety committee, said she met recently with Oftelie to address concerns over the council’s Less-Lethal Weapons ordinance, which has affected SPD’s crowd-control abilities — a compliance sticking point — and is encouraged by progress being made.

The council passed an initial version of the ordinance during the height of the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, prohibiting police from using blast balls and some other less-lethal weapons. [A federal judge issued a restraining order preventing the ordinance from going into effect](#), however, and the council has since passed a revised version of the ordinance — about which Oftelie said some questions still remain.

Herbold said she “found it interesting that Dr. Oftelie concludes that there is continued sustained compliance in all three areas, but he does not recommend to the Court that consent decree monitoring end.”

Despite these areas of concern, Oftelie said SPD has achieved sustained, full compliance in crisis intervention, stops and detentions, and bias-free policing over the past two years, making the city eligible to ask Robart to release it from the consent decree’s oversight in those areas.

With the exception of the crowd-control issues, the monitor said officers have maintained full compliance with use-of-force requirements as well.

Oftelie said in an interview that he will in the near future present SPD with a 2022 monitoring plan that will lay a path for full compliance with the final requirements of the consent decree. He said he expects the city will be ready to ask for dissolution of the consent decree in its entirety sometime next year.

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HEADLINE	05/19 Alcohol banned Snake River ‘party’ spot
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/northwest/alcohol-banned-at-snake-river-party-spot-popular-with-wa-and-idaho-college-students/
GIST	<p>Alcohol has been banned at one of two parks on the Snake River that is popular with college students in Eastern Washington.</p> <p>The Army Corps of Engineers announced Thursday that alcohol would no longer be allowed at Granite Point park, where Washington State University and University of Idaho students like to celebrate the end and the start of the academic year.</p> <p>Tri-Cities charter buses also are seen parked there occasionally.</p> <p>However, alcohol continues to be allowed at Illia Dunes park, another spot popular with college students.</p> <p>Area college students call the Granite Point park’s rocky hillside that stands over a river swimming hole “the cliffs.”</p>

	<p>It makes the park near Lower Granite Dam a popular spot for dangerous activities like cliff jumping, which is prohibited, and swimming across the narrow canyon channel, which has barge traffic.</p> <p>“These activities become even more dangerous when combined with alcohol use,” the Corps said in a statement.</p> <p>Officials also are hoping that the ban will reduce the number of complaints it receives related to alcohol abuse and allow a more pleasant experience for all visitors.</p> <p>A spring 2018 party there attracted 300 to 500 people to Granite Point and left 800 pounds of debris that Corps workers hauled off.</p> <p>Washington State and Idaho students also volunteered to help with the cleanup. The park had to be closed for a week.</p> <p>Illia Dunes, often called the Dunes, just downstream of the same dam, also has had problems.</p> <p>It was trashed in late August 2012 when more than 3,000 people visited. It happened again in early September 2014, when 1,800 people visited the Dunes on one day, leaving it littered with broken bottles and beer cans. The water level in the river had to be lowered to clean up trash in the water.</p> <p>Visits to the two parks have been down this spring, likely because of the cool, rainy weather, according to the Corps.</p>
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HEADLINE	05/19 Officials tout homeless outreach success
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/homeless/officials-tout-outreach-success-at-seattles-woodland-park-mayor-bruce-harrell-promises-homelessness-plan-in-may/
GIST	<p>Scores of people experiencing homelessness in North Seattle were removed from an encampment in Woodland Park over the last four months, with the majority leaving in the days leading up to the city's clearing of more than 40 tents and structures last week.</p> <p>With 80 people connected to shelter or housing, officials from the city and King County Regional Homelessness Authority are touting their apparent success from a “genuine outreach” approach.</p> <p>“This is the largest number of people connected with shelter and housing during an encampment clearing in [the] city’s history,” Councilmember Dan Strauss said in a news conference Thursday, a little over a week after the encampment in his district was cleared.</p> <p>“When we lead with a human-centered approach, we see these results,” he said.</p> <p>According to the mayor’s office, outreach to the encampment began in January, with more than four months of work resulting in a total of 100 offers for shelter and over 80 individuals actually connected with shelter, including 60 referrals to tiny house villages, 25 referrals to enhanced shelters and four relocations to permanent housing alternatives.</p> <p>“This is what we want to highlight today, which is a critical step toward progress, permanent housing and treatment,” Mayor Bruce Harrell said.</p> <p>But the broader impact of the clearing lies in the ability of partners — including the city, the King County Regional Homelessness Authority, nonprofits and community groups — to replicate thorough outreach, according to Regional Homelessness Authority CEO Marc Dones.</p>

“This can’t be a victory lap because not everyone is housed, right? And in homelessness, there’s no such thing as a good press conference until everybody is housed, and today is not that day,” Dones said. “However, what we have done in partnership is different, and it’s important that we recognize that difference.”

According to Dones and the mayor’s office, the Woodland Park effort resulted in the most exits of any encampment in the city’s history. That success, Dones says, is a result of “genuine outreach” to meet the individual needs of those in the encampment and not forcing anyone out before shelter was available.

“This time, as we did in Ballard Commons and as we did in City Hall Park, we prioritized getting to know what people needed. We prioritized generating placements for them based on those needs. And we let what the system could do — that bed availability — dictate the speed at which we moved, rather than trying to force a false outcome,” Dones said.

“The results of that really do speak for themselves,” Dones added.

Connecting people with treatment and services throughout the removal ranged from REACH, a homeless service provider coordinating medical treatment through a nurse on-site, to the Seattle Parks Department coordinating requested trash pickup for those in the encampment.

“We can make sure that people’s needs are being met, that the basics are being taken care of,” Dones said. “And again, approaching it with consistent humanity.”

Housing plan to come

When asked about a commitment Harrell made previously to stand up 1,000 units of shelter in his first six months in office, Deputy Mayor of Housing and Homelessness Tiffany Washington said the administration was “on track,” with the 1,000 units identified internally.

A previously promised public dashboard — which Harrell says will track available units, number of encampments cleared and where in the city people are living unhoused, and will include a “sort of template” of the city’s housing strategy — should be available by the end of the month, according to a spokesperson for the mayor.

Harrell campaigned on clearing encampments — even hosting one speech on the subject at Woodland Park — and has been bullish in doing so, moving more than 30 in less than his first 100 days.

When asked if the success of the slower approach at Woodland Park would result in a slower rate of encampment clearings going forward, Harrell said “the short answer is no.”

Washington explained that the volume of people needing shelter from Woodland Park made the clearing an anomaly, and the city would not need to take the same slow approach for other encampments.

“And so, what it has taken to clear these areas are because of the number of people who sheltered in place for two years. We don’t have anywhere near the size of the encampments that have been closed anywhere else across the city,” Washington said. “And so we have regular shelter bed availability that can probably meet the needs on a regular basis.”

Since the removals began at the Woodland Park encampment, new people have started camping in the park. According to Dones, that’s a sign of progress.

“It is a marker of success that people came to a place where they saw a good thing happening. That’s what we need to replicate,” they said. “We need to earn the trust of the people experiencing homelessness in our community. We have broken that trust. We must restore it by doing this again and again and again until everyone is housed.”

HEADLINE	05/19 Tacoma ICE facility detainees hunger strike
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/local/article261594082.html
GIST	<p>Nine people held at the Northwest ICE Processing Center in Tacoma have joined in a hunger strike to protest what they say are unclean conditions amid worries about a COVID spread.</p> <p>The strike began Friday, according to the group La Resistencia. The facility that is among the largest immigration detention centers in the U.S. It can hold about 1,500 people going through immigration-status proceedings, the Seattle Times reported.</p> <p>It's operated by the for-profit GEO Group in partnership with Immigration and Customs Enforcement. The hunger strikers want better cleaning, more nutritious food, better access to medical services and jobs that pay a minimum wage.</p> <p>"Their demands show how bad the environment is," said Maru Mora Villalpando of La Resistencia, a Washington organization led by undocumented people that advocates for closing the center. "It's filthy."</p> <p>In a statement, GEO said the company has taken steps to mitigate COVID risks through cleaning, social distancing and testing. Almost 400 COVID cases have been reported among detainees throughout the pandemic, according to ICE data.</p> <p>GEO said its centers have access to physicians, dentists and mental-health professionals.</p> <p>"Ensuring the health and safety of all those entrusted to our care and our employees has always been our No. 1 priority," Christopher Ferreira, manager of corporate relations, said in an email.</p>
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Cyber Awareness

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HEADLINE	05/20 Food supply chain at risk from hackers
SOURCE	https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-61336659
GIST	<p>Modern "smart" farm machinery is vulnerable to malicious hackers, leaving global supply chains exposed to risk, experts are warning.</p> <p>It is feared hackers could exploit flaws in agricultural hardware used to plant and harvest crops.</p> <p>Agricultural manufacturing giant John Deere says it is now working to fix any weak spots in its software.</p> <p>A recent University of Cambridge report said automatic crop sprayers, drones and robotic harvesters could be hacked.</p> <p>The UK government and the FBI have warned that the threat of cyber-attacks is growing.</p> <p>John Deere said protecting customers, their machines and their data was a "top priority".</p> <p>Smart technology is increasingly being used to make farms more efficient and productive - for example, until now the labour-intensive harvesting of delicate food crops such as asparagus has been beyond the reach of machines.</p> <p>The latest generation of agricultural robots use artificial intelligence, minimising human involvement. They may help to plug a labour shortage or increase yield, but fear of the inherent security risk is growing, adding to concern over food-supply chains already threatened by the war in Ukraine and Covid.</p>

Chris Chavasse, the co-founder of Muddy Machines, which is trialling an autonomous asparagus-harvesting robot called Sprout, said: "There is a real risk that people anywhere in the world could try and take control of these machines," he said. "to get them to do whatever those people want, or just prevent them from operating."

He said potentially someone could drive Sprout into a hedge or a ditch, or prevent it from working at all, so they are working with security researchers to address any vulnerabilities.

Asparagus farming is unlikely to be a prime target, but Mr Chavasse believes malicious hackers could threaten "mission critical" agricultural infrastructure.

Even the largest companies aren't safe from cyber gangs. Some use ransomware: malicious code that can encrypt data and lock systems.

Last year, one of the world's biggest meat processing company, JBS, paid \$11m in ransom to resolve a cyber attack. This month, top US agriculture firm, AGCO, was hit by a ransomware attack that affected production.

In April, a group of official governmental cyber security authorities including ones from the UK, US and Australia, warned that Russian state-sponsored hackers could target supply chains as a vital part of Western national infrastructure.

One self-styled ethical hacker, who goes by the name Sick Codes and asked to remain anonymous, told the BBC he had discovered weaknesses in John Deere's software, which he had reported. He said he found a way to access company information and machine data through websites and apps.

Sick Codes said he had also found vulnerabilities in systems used by CNH Industrial, which manufactures New Holland Agriculture machinery.

He fears it's just a matter of time before a sophisticated hacker finds critical vulnerabilities and causes major disruption to already vulnerable food supply chains.

"That's what we're trying to prevent - stalling something during the most important times, particularly seeding or harvesting. If you can't move your tractor during that time, or if you can't pick or take the crop out of the ground, you can imagine what happens. It just stops, the whole thing," he said.

James Johnson, John Deere's global chief information security officer, told the BBC that the company had been liaising with a number of ethical hackers on vulnerabilities they have found.

He said those found so far by Sick Codes did "not pose a threat to customers or their machines".

He added, "No company, including John Deere, is immune to vulnerabilities, but we are deeply committed and work tirelessly to safeguard our customers, and the role they play in the global food supply chain."

A spokesperson for CNH Industrial said it took security very seriously, and added: "We continuously invest in improving our security posture."

Benjamin Turner, chief operating officer at Agrimetrics, one of four UK government-backed agri-tech centres of agricultural innovation, said: "Hacking into one tractor, you can upset a farmer and maybe damage their profitability for a season.

"Hacking into a fleet of tractors, suddenly, you've got the power to affect the yield in whole areas of the country."

Meanwhile out in the fields, even everyday farm machinery uses systems that are potentially vulnerable.

	<p>Richard Heady, a beef and arable farmer in Buckinghamshire whose tractor can be steered by a GPS positioning system, said: "Everything is so interlinked now, just by bringing down one system it can stop deliveries coming to us or stop tractors moving at all. If we are in a busy harvesting window we can't just have tractors sitting around.</p> <p>"We have seen empty shelves because of Covid - we could see the same thing happen if we get a cyber attack."</p>
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HEADLINE	05/20 Microsoft: this botnet growing fast, on hunt
SOURCE	https://www.zdnet.com/article/microsoft-this-botnet-is-growing-fast-and-hunting-for-servers-with-weak-passwords/
GIST	<p>Microsoft has seen a 254% increase in activity over the past few months from XorDDoS, a roughly eight-year-old network of infected Linux machines that is used for distributed denial of service (DDoS) attacks.</p> <p>XorDdos conducts automated password-guessing attacks across thousands of Linux servers to find matching admin credentials used on Secure Shell (SSH) servers. SSH is a secure network communications protocol commonly used for remote system administration.</p> <p>Once credentials are gained, the botnet uses root privileges to install itself on a Linux device and uses XOR-based encryption to communicate with the attacker's command and control infrastructure.</p> <p>While DDoS attacks are a serious threat to system availability and are growing in size each year, Microsoft is worried about other capabilities of these botnets.</p> <p>"We found that devices first infected with XorDdos were later infected with additional malware such as the Tsunami backdoor, which further deploys the XMRig coin miner," Microsoft notes.</p> <p>XorDDoS was one of the most active Linux-based malware families of 2021, according to Crowdstrike. The malware has thrived off the growth of Internet of Things (IoT) devices, which mostly run on variants of Linux, but it has also targeted misconfigured Docker clusters in the cloud. Other top malware families targeting IoT devices include Mirai and Mozi.</p> <p>Microsoft didn't see XorDdos directly installing and distributing the Tsunami backdoor, but its researchers think XorDdos is used as a vector for follow-on malicious activities.</p> <p>XorDdos can hide its activities from common detection techniques. In a recent campaign, Microsoft saw it overwriting sensitive files with a null byte.</p> <p>"Its evasion capabilities include obfuscating the malware's activities, evading rule-based detection mechanisms and hash-based malicious file lookup, as well as using anti-forensic techniques to break process tree-based analysis. We observed in recent campaigns that XorDdos hides malicious activities from analysis by overwriting sensitive files with a null byte. It also includes various persistence mechanisms to support different Linux distributions," Microsoft notes.</p> <p>The XorDdos payload Microsoft analyzed is a 32-bit Linux format ELF file with a modular binary written in C/C++. Microsoft notes XorDdos uses a daemon process that runs in the background, outside the control of users, and terminates when the system is shutdown.</p> <p>But the malware can automatically relaunch when a system is restarted thanks to several scripts and commands that cause it to automatically run when a system boots.</p> <p>XorDdoS can perform multiple DDoS attack techniques, including SYN flood attacks, DNS attacks, and ACK flood attacks.</p>

	It collects characteristics about an infected device, including the magic string, OS release version, malware version, rootkit presence, memory stats, CPU information, and LAN speed, which are encrypted and then sent to the C2 server.
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HEADLINE	05/19 Critical flaw Premium WordPress themes
SOURCE	https://threatpost.com/vulnerability-wordpress-themes-site-takeover/179672/
GIST	<p>A critical privilege escalation flaw found in two themes used by more than 90,000 WordPress sites can allow threat actors to take over the sites completely, researchers have found.</p> <p>WordFence Threat Intelligence Team researcher Ramuel Gall discovered the flaw, one of five vulnerabilities he found between early April and early May in the Jupiter and JupiterX Premium WordPress themes, he revealed in a blog post published Wednesday.</p> <p>One of the flaws—tracked as CVE-2022-1654 and rated as 9.9, or critical on the CVSS—allows for “any authenticated attacker, including a subscriber or customer-level attacker, to gain administrative privileges and completely take over any site running either the Jupiter Theme or JupiterX Core Plugin,” he wrote. The plugin is required to run the JupiterX theme.</p> <p>Affected versions of the themes are: Jupiter Theme 6.10.1 or earlier, and JupiterX Core Plugin 2.0.7 or earlier.</p> <p>WordFence finished their investigation of most of flaws on April 5 and reported them to the Jupiter and JupiterX theme developer ArtBees on the same day; on May 3 they notified the developer of an additional Jupiter theme flaw. By May 10, the developed had released updated versions of both the Jupiter and JupiterX themes that had patched all the flaws.</p> <p>Critical Vulnerability</p> <p>The critical flaw found resides in a function, <code>uninstallTemplate</code>, which is intended to reset a site after a template is uninstalled. However, it “has the additional effect of elevating the user calling the function to an administrator role,” Gall wrote. In the Jupiter theme, the function is found in the theme itself; in JupiterX, it’s present in the JupiterX Core plugin.</p> <p>“Vulnerable versions register AJAX actions but do not perform any capability checks or nonce checks,” he wrote.</p> <p>On a site with a vulnerable version of the Jupiter Theme installed, any logged-in user can elevate their privileges to those of an administrator by sending an AJAX request with the action parameter set to <code>abb_uninstall_template</code>. This calls the <code>uninstallTemplate</code> function, which calls the <code>resetWordpressDatabase</code> function, which effectively reinstalls the site with the currently logged-in user as the new site owner, Gall explained.</p> <p>On a site where a vulnerable version of the JupiterX Core plugin is installed, someone can access the same functionality by sending an AJAX request with the action parameter set to <code>jupiterx_core_cp_uninstall_template</code>, he said.</p> <p>Other Vulnerabilities</p> <p>WordPress plugins, often developed by third-party developers, are notoriously buggy. Previous flaws found in plugins for the popular website-creation and -hosting platform also have allowed for site takeover, as well as enabled WordPress subscribers to totally wipe sites not belonging to them, or attackers to forge emails to subscribers.</p> <p>Of the other flaws that Gall discovered, three—tracked as CVE-2022-1656, CVE-2022-1658 and CVE-2022-1659—are rated as medium risk and one, CVE-2022-1657 is rated as high risk.</p>

	<p>The high-risk flaw, which affects JupiterX Theme 2.0.6 or earlier and Jupiter Theme 6.10.1 or earlier, can allow an attacker to obtain privileged information, such as nonce values, or perform restricted actions, Gall explained. This can be done by including and executing files from any location on the site.</p> <p>“Vulnerable versions of the Jupiter and JupiterX Themes allow logged-in users, including subscriber-level users, to perform Path Traversal and Local File inclusion,” Gall explained.</p> <p>In the JupiterX theme, this can be done by using the jupiterx_cp_load_pane_action AJAX action present in the lib/admin/control-panel/control-panel.php file to call the load_control_panel_pane function. “It is possible to use this action to include any local PHP file via the slug parameter,” Gall wrote.</p> <p>The Jupiter theme has a nearly identical vulnerability, which an attacker can exploit via the mka_cp_load_pane_action AJAX action present in the framework/admin/control-panel/logic/functions.php file, which calls the mka_cp_load_pane_action function, he said.</p> <p>Wordfence researchers recommend that anyone using the affected themes updated to the patched versions immediately. The company released a firewall rule to protect Wordfence Premium, Wordfence Care and Wordfence Response customers on April 5, and free Wordfence users on May 4.</p>
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HEADLINE	05/19 Fake Windows 11 downloads
SOURCE	https://thehackernews.com/2022/05/hackers-trick-users-with-fake-windows.html
GIST	<p>Fraudulent domains masquerading as Microsoft's Windows 11 download portal are attempting to trick users into deploying trojanized installation files to infect systems with the Vidar information stealer malware.</p> <p>"The spoofed sites were created to distribute malicious ISO files which lead to a Vidar info-stealer infection on the endpoint," Zscaler said in a report. "These variants of Vidar malware fetch the C2 configuration from attacker-controlled social media channels hosted on Telegram and Mastodon network."</p> <p>Some of the rogue distribution vector domains, which were registered last month on April 20, consist of ms-win11[.]com, win11-serv[.]com, and win11install[.]com, and ms-teams-app[.]net.</p> <p>In addition, the cybersecurity firm cautioned that the threat actor behind the impersonation campaign is also leveraging backdoored versions of Adobe Photoshop and other legitimate software such as Microsoft Teams to deliver Vidar malware.</p> <p>The ISO file, for its part, contains an executable that's unusually large in size (over 300MB) in an attempt to evade detection by security solutions and is signed with an expired certificate from Avast that was likely stolen following the latter's breach in October 2019.</p> <p>But embedded within the 330MB binary is a 3.3MB-sized executable that's the Vidar malware, with the rest of the file content padded with 0x10 bytes to artificially inflate the size.</p> <p>In the next phase of the attack chain, Vidar establishes connections to a remote command-and-control (C2) server to retrieve legitimate DLL files such as sqlite3.dll and vcruntime140.dll to siphon valuable data from compromised systems.</p> <p>Also notable is the abuse of Mastodon and Telegram by the threat actor to store the C2 IP address in the description field of the attacker-controlled accounts and communities.</p> <p>The findings add to a list of different methods that have been uncovered in the past month to distribute the Vidar malware, including Microsoft Compiled HTML Help (CHM) files and a loader called Colibri.</p>

	<p>"The threat actors distributing Vidar malware have demonstrated their ability to social engineer victims into installing Vidar stealer using themes related to the latest popular software applications," the researchers said.</p> <p>"As always, users should be cautious when downloading software applications from the Internet and download software only from the official vendor websites."</p>
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HEADLINE	05/20 UK sextortion cases doubled in 2021
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/uk-sextortion-cases-doubled/
GIST	<p>Sextortion cases in the UK doubled in 2021 compared to 2020, new figures have shown.</p> <p>The UK's Revenge Porn Helpline revealed it received 1124 reports of sextortion last year, which compares to 593 in 2020. Nearly nine in 10 (88%) cases involved a male victim.</p> <p>In addition, the number of reports of all types of intimate image abuse surged by 40% in 2021, from 3146 to 4406. This is now six times the number reported in 2016.</p> <p>Sextortion occurs when intimate images or videos are captured during an online sexual exchange, and the victim is subsequently blackmailed with threats to share them, often with friends and family.</p> <p>The helpline, which the UK government launched in 2015 to help tackle the issue of people sharing intimate images online, said it believes these reports are a fraction of the real number of sextortion cases because of the "huge amount of shame" around falling prey to scammers.</p> <p>Interestingly, in 80% of cases, the perpetrator was a criminal gang, with 11% involving a current or former partner. The helpline noted that the threats "are very real, but the content is rarely released."</p> <p>Of the victims who did have their image released, four-fifths (79%) were women.</p> <p>Worryingly, the report added that around two-thirds (65%) of victims who made reports to police said they received a negative response. In addition, a third of cases were dropped by victims for reasons like lack of anonymity and trust in police.</p> <p>Commenting on the findings, Jake Moore, global cyber security advisor at ESET, said: "Hackers will use intimate images to extort, and will often go to extreme lengths. But unfortunately, paying a ransom immediately to the attackers often just announces that you are willing to pay any amount necessary to prevent the images being shared online. This simply picks those out who are willing to react, and they will be repeatedly targeted until the money dries up.</p> <p>"As technology enables attackers to remain anonymous, there is often little the police can do, but any sextortion demand must be reported immediately to help tackle this growing problem.</p> <p>"Although not often thought about until after the fact, people must think clearly as to whom they are sending private images to and only share images with people they fully trust. They must try to keep an open mind about what could happen with an image should it leave their phone and get into the wrong hands."</p>
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HEADLINE	05/19 DOJ: not prosecute ethical hackers
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/us-doj-will-no-longer-prosecute-ethical-hackers-under-cfaa/

GIST

The U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) has announced a revision of its policy on how federal prosecutors should charge violations of the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act (CFAA), carving out "good-faith" security research from being prosecuted.

With this policy update, the DOJ is separating cases of good-faith security research from ill-intended hacking, which were previously distinguished by a blurred line that frequently placed ethical security research in a problematic, gray legal area.

Under these new policies, software testing, investigation, security flaw analysis, and network breaches intended to promote the security and safety of the target devices or services are not to be prosecuted by federal prosecutors.

"Computer security research is a key driver of improved cybersecurity," said Deputy Attorney General Lisa O. Monaco.

"The department has never been interested in prosecuting good-faith computer security research as a crime, and today's announcement promotes cybersecurity by providing clarity for good-faith security researchers who root out vulnerabilities for the common good."

Good faith security research is defined as "accessing a computer solely for purposes of good-faith testing, investigation, and/or correction of a security flaw or vulnerability, where such activity is carried out in a manner designed to avoid any harm to individuals or the public, and where the information derived from the activity is used primarily to promote the security or safety of the class of devices, machines, or online services to which the accessed computer belongs, or those who use such devices, machines, or online services."

The new policy focuses specifically on deliberate breaches of access limitations on computers and networks or even on online accounts of other users.

However, it does not give a pass to hacking under the pretense of conducting security research while using said research to extort companies. As such, federal prosecutors will view all cases under an ethical lens to determine the actor's intentions.

For example, if someone finds a critical vulnerability on a product and then extorts the software vendor to pay them an amount for not disclosing it to the public, that would still be regarded as a CFAA violation and charged accordingly.

Similarly, publicly leaking the data found in an exposed database or selling it to others cannot be justified even if the owner was unresponsive, so it will still be prosecuted.

While this is good news for security researchers, it will still be determined by federal prosecutors whether a researcher was acting in good faith. Due to this, it is still strongly advised that researchers join bug bounty programs and contact companies for vulnerability research guidelines that they may have in place.

The goal for CFAA enforcement remains to promote privacy and cybersecurity, so the case here is to protect security researchers from legal action launched by firms that don't distinguish between ethical reports and aggressive breaches.

A recent example is that of Rob Dyke, a cloud security engineer, who ethically reported a data leak to a UK-based non-profit and soon after faced an investigation over "Computer Misuse" from the local police.

The Computer Misuse Act in the U.K. has acted as an intimidating force against the infosec community, and the story is very similar to the CFAA in the U.S.

	<p>The DOJ also made additional clarifications in the new policies regarding cases of breaking terms of service, creating multiple pseudonymous accounts on a platform, and using work computers for personal purposes.</p> <p>While these cases may be a contractual violation, the U.S. government will not consider these a violation of the CFAA's "exceeds authorized access" prohibition. However, if a user's permission to access these services were expressly revoked by the company through a legal means, such as a cease and desist letter, then it could fall under the federal cybercrime laws.</p> <p>A prominent example of a case that might not be prosecutable based on this is that of Aaron Schwartz, who violated the terms of MIT's JSTOR paper hosting portal by downloading millions of documents.</p> <p>Schwartz was charged with CFAA "exceeds authorized access" violations and eventually succumbed to the pressure of facing prison time by committing suicide.</p>
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HEADLINE	05/19 Conti ransomware shuts operations
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/conti-ransomware-shuts-down-operation-rebrands-into-smaller-units/
GIST	<p>The notorious Conti ransomware gang has officially shut down their operation, with infrastructure taken offline and team leaders told that the brand is no more.</p> <p>This news comes from Advanced Intel's Yelisey Boguslavskiy, who tweeted this afternoon that the gang's internal infrastructure was turned off.</p> <p>While public-facing 'Conti News' data leak and the ransom negotiation sites are still online, Boguslavskiy told BleepingComputer that the Tor admin panels used by members to perform negotiations and publish "news" on their data leak site are now offline.</p> <p>In addition, BleepingComputer was told that other internal services, such as their rocket chat servers, are being decommissioned.</p> <p>While it may seem strange for Conti to shut down in the middle of their information war with Costa Rica, Boguslavskiy tells us that Conti conducted this very public attack to create a facade of a live operation while the Conti members slowly migrated to other, smaller ransomware operations.</p> <p>"However, AdvIntel's unique adversarial visibility and intelligence findings led to, what was in fact, the opposite conclusion: The only goal Conti had wanted to meet with this final attack was to use the platform as a tool of publicity, performing their own death and subsequent rebirth in the most plausible way it could have been conceived," explains a report being released tomorrow by Advanced Intel.</p> <p>"The agenda to conduct the attack on Costa Rica for the purpose of publicity instead of ransom was declared internally by the Conti leadership. Internal communications between group members suggested that the requested ransom payment was far below \$1 million USD (despite unverified claims of the ransom being \$10 million USD, followed by Conti's own claims that the sum was \$20 million USD)."</p> <p>Conti's gone, but the operation lives on</p> <p>While the Conti ransomware brand is no more, the cybercrime syndicate will continue to play a significant role in the ransomware industry for a long time to come.</p> <p>Boguslavskiy told BleepingComputer that instead of rebranding as another large ransomware operation, the Conti leadership has instead partnered with other smaller ransomware gangs to conduct attacks.</p>

Under this partnership, the smaller ransomware gangs gain an influx of experienced Conti pentesters, negotiators, and operators. The Conti cybercrime syndicate gains mobility and greater evasion of law enforcement by splitting into smaller "cells," all managed by central leadership.

The Advanced Intel report explains that Conti has partnered with numerous well-known ransomware operations, including HelloKitty, AvosLocker, Hive, BlackCat, BlackByte, and more.

The existing Conti members, including negotiators, intel analysts, pentesters, and developers, are spread throughout other ransomware operations. While these members will now use these other ransomware operation's encryptors and negotiation sites, they are still part of the larger Conti cybercrime syndicate.

Advanced Intel also states that new autonomous groups of Conti members have been created that focus entirely on data exfiltration and not data encryption. Some of these groups include [Karakurt](#), [BlackByte](#), and the [Bazarcall collective](#).

These initiatives allow the existing cybercrime syndicate to continue operating but no longer under the Conti name.

A toxic brand

The rebranding of Conti comes as no surprise to researchers and journalists who have been following them over the past months, if not the past years.

The Conti ransomware operation launched in the summer of 2020, after taking the place of the Ryuk ransomware.

Like Ryuk, Conti was distributed through partnerships with other malware infections, such as TrickBot and BazarLoader, who provided initial access to the ransomware gang.

Over time, Conti grew into the largest ransomware operation, slowly turning into a cybercrime syndicate as they took over the operation of TrickBot, BazarLoader, and Emotet.

Conti was responsible for numerous attacks during their time, including those against the [City of Tulsa](#), [Broward County Public Schools](#), and [Advantech](#).

They gained widespread media attention after they attacked the Ireland's [Health Service Executive](#) (HSE) and [Department of Health \(DoH\)](#), shutting down the IT systems of the country for weeks.

Ultimately, the ransomware gang [provided a free decryptor to Ireland's HSE](#), but at that point, they were firmly in the crosshairs of law enforcement around the world.

However, it wasn't until Conti sided with Russia's invasion of Ukraine that the Conti brand became incredibly toxic and their fate was sealed.

After siding with Russia, a Ukrainian security researcher began leaking over [170,000 internal chat conversations](#) between the Conti ransomware gang members and the [source code for the Conti ransomware encryptor](#).

Once this source code became public, other threat actors began using it in their own attacks, with one hacking group using the [Conti encryptor in attacks against Russian entities](#).

The US government considers Conti one of the costliest strains of ransomware ever created, with thousands of victims and over \$150 million in ransom payments.

The Conti ransomware gang's exploits have led the [US government to offer up to a \\$15,000,000 reward](#) for the identification and location of Conti members in leadership roles.

HEADLINE	05/19 Phishing attacks for initial access surge
SOURCE	https://www.darkreading.com/risk/phishing-attacks-for-initial-access-surged-q1
GIST	<p>Threat actors doubled down on their use of phishing emails as an initial attack vector during the first quarter of 2022 — and in many cases then used that access to drop ransomware or to extort organizations in other ways.</p> <p>Researchers from Kroll recently analyzed data gathered from security incidents they responded to in the first three months of this year. The analysis showed a 54% increase in incidents of phishing for initial access compared with the same period last year.</p> <p>For the first time since Microsoft disclosed the so-called ProxyLogon set of vulnerabilities in Exchange Server in the first quarter of 2021, incidents tied to email compromises surpassed those related to ransomware. Kroll described the sharp increase in phishing activity as likely the result of a surge in activity tied to Emotet and IceID malware — threat actors have been using both to drop other malware.</p> <p>Multiple Attack Vectors</p> <p>Kroll's analysis shows that attackers leveraged the initial foothold gained via phishing in multiple ways, including to drop ransomware and malware, and to extort without any ransomware or encryption.</p> <p>In one incident that Kroll investigated during the first quarter, adversaries acquired an organization's global admin credentials after an IT employee at the company clicked on a phishing email they had sent. The adversaries used the credentials to take over multiple email accounts belonging to other members of the IT team as well as the C-suite, which in turn they used to download sensitive enterprise data. The attackers followed up with a demand seeking a ransom in exchange for the attack to stop.</p> <p>In other instances, Kroll's researchers identified attackers breaking into a network by exploiting a vulnerability and then using that access to launch convincing-looking phishing campaigns. In one incident, the attackers exploited the ProxyShell vulnerability in Exchange Server to access the target network. Once inside, the attackers attempted to phish employees by attaching a malicious .zip file to a reply to a legacy internal email thread. The .zip file was disguised as an invoice, and appeared to be from a trusted internal source: Several users opened it and unknowingly downloaded IceID on their systems. That organization was subsequently hit with the QuantumLocker ransomware two weeks later, Kroll said.</p> <p>Phishing was not the only tactic that attackers used to try and gain initial access on a target system or network. In several incidents that Kroll investigated, threat actors exploited widely publicized vulnerabilities such as ProxyLogon and Log4Shell to gain a foothold from which to drop ransomware such as Conti, AvosLocker, and QuantumLocker on target networks.</p> <p>Inadequate Defenses</p> <p>Patrick Harr, CEO at SlashNext, a provider of anti-phishing services, says current organizations defenses are not fully designed to protect against attacks that appear to originate from inside the organization. "You can't stop phishing that comes from legitimate services with employee awareness training," he says. "As phishing continues to grow as a vector for ransomware attacks, zero-hour, real-time threat prevention solutions are critical to prevent these threats."</p> <p>The broader adoption of work-from-home models over the past two years has also made it easier for attackers to target employees in phishing campaigns — and get away with it. "Remote work certainly created more opportunities for threat actors to execute [business email compromise] and other phishing attacks," says Hank Schless, senior manager of security solutions at Lookout. "Without being able to walk over to another person's desk in the office, employees have a much harder time validating unknown texts or emails."</p> <p>The increased reliance on smartphones and tablets for internal communications has created several issues, he adds. Spear-phishing attacks on mobile devices, for instance, are much harder to catch than on a desktop. Users also cannot preview link destinations or verify the sender's identity. So, a lot of the things</p>

that employees are trained to recognize as part of their phishing awareness training are hard or almost impossible to spot on a mobile device, Schless says.

Temporary Ransomware Drop-off

Kroll's analysis showed that ransomware attacks — as a proportion of all attacks — dropped 20% between the fourth quarter of 2021 and the first quarter of 2022 and 30% between the third quarter of 2021 and the first quarter of 2022. At least some of the drop-off in attacks appears to have resulted from law enforcement's disruption of malicious activity by groups such as REvil, Kroll said. Another factor that likely contributed to the slowdown in ransomware attacks was the voluntary exit from the scene made by groups such as BlackMatter, Kroll added.

However, early data from the second quarter of 2022 suggests that ransomware actors are regrouping and preparing to resume their usual level of activity soon, according to Kroll.

An earlier report from Digital Shadows noted a similar drop-off in ransomware incidents in the first quarter of 2022 but pointed to emerging trends in the space that could have implications for enterprise organizations. One example is the growing trend by ransomware groups to align themselves for or against Russia in that country's war against Ukraine.

Like Kroll, researchers from Digital Shadows also observed incidents involving extortion, where [no ransomware was deployed](#). One example cited by both companies was the attacks by a group identified as Lapsus\$ (aka DEV-0537) that targeted several technology and security firms in the first quarter of 2022. In some of the incidents, the attackers defaced the websites of target organizations and claimed they had suffered a ransomware attack. In other instance, the group used stolen credentials to exfiltrate data and then threatened victims that it would release the data publicly unless paid a ransom.

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HEADLINE	05/19 DeadBolt ransomware hit QNAP devices
SOURCE	https://www.techtarget.com/searchsecurity/news/252518453/QNAP-devices-hit-by-DeadBolt-ransomware-again?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>QNAP devices have been hit by DeadBolt ransomware for at least the second time in less than six months.</p> <p>In January, QNAP warned users that a new ransomware strain was widely targeting its network-attached storage (NAS) devices using an alleged zero-day vulnerability. DeadBolt was encrypting users' data and demanding bitcoin payments in ongoing attacks on QNAP devices. Now, it's back for more.</p> <p>The Taiwanese hardware vendor issued a statement Thursday that confirmed an investigation was underway regarding a new series of attacks. Once again, DeadBolt ransomware targeted NAS devices, which is particularly dangerous due to the devices' constant internet access.</p> <p>In Thursday's security advisory, QNAP urged customers to take immediate actions to secure the hardware.</p> <p>"According to the investigation by the QNAP Product Security Incident Response Team ... the affected models were mainly TS-x51 series and TS-x53 series," the advisory said. "QNAP urges all NAS users to check and update QTS [QNAP's NAS OS] to the latest version as soon as possible, and avoid exposing their NAS to the Internet."</p> <p>It's unclear if DeadBolt ransomware actors were exploiting specific vulnerabilities. The QNAP advisory made no mention of any vulnerabilities or CVEs. QNAP did not respond to SearchSecurity's request for comment at press time.</p> <p>Palo Alto Networks' Unit 42 addressed the newest wave of DeadBolt attacks on Twitter Monday and estimated they began on May 13. While the vendor believed the same ransomware master key from the previous QNAP attacks was used, it also noted differences.</p>

"Unit 42 is observing a new wave of attacks of the Deadbolt #ransomware targeting QNAP NAS devices involving a new lock screen with updated JavaScript. Cortex Xpanse discovered ~3000 instances of infected devices," Unit 42 said in a [tweet](#).

In March, security vendor Censys discovered that more than 1,000 QNAP QTS devices had been infected by DeadBolt ransomware. While it is unclear if this was an entirely new attack or fallout from January, Censys did uncover similarities. The ransom demand for individual victims remained unchanged at around \$1,000, and the ransom for QNAP, which would have given the vendor the master encryption key, clocked in at more than \$2 million.

"At this time, Censys cannot state whether this is a new attack targeting different versions of the QTS operating system, or if it's the original exploit targeting unpatched QNAP devices," Censys wrote in a [blog](#).

In a [FAQ post](#) updated on March 28, QNAP said it believed the attack was related to January, though it doesn't appear entirely clear.

The latest attacks on QNAP devices highlight an ongoing patching problem, if that many exposed instances remained, which represents the urgency to update following the latest attack.

A recent [joint cybersecurity advisory](#) from U.S. and other government agencies warned enterprises of the most common mistakes and security weaknesses that allow attackers to gain initial access inside a network. They included misconfigured services that are exposed to the public internet, as well as open ports and out-of-date software.

QNAP recommended that users disable port forwarding to stop exposing NAS devices to the internet.

DeadBolt activity first surfaced in January during the attack against QNAP, which appears to be the only reported target.

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HEADLINE	05/20 Record-level bot traffic enables online fraud
SOURCE	https://www.helpnetsecurity.com/2022/05/20/bad-bots-website-traffic/?web_view=true
GIST	<p>Bad bots, software applications that run automated tasks with malicious intent, accounted for a record-setting 27.7% of all global website traffic in 2021, up from 25.6% in 2020, an Imperva report reveals. The three most common bot attacks were account takeover (ATO), content or price scraping, and scalping to obtain limited-availability items.</p> <p>Bad bots are often the first indicator of online fraud and represent a risk to digital businesses, as well as their customers. In 2021, evasive bad bots — a grouping of moderate and advanced bad bots that elude standard security defenses — made up 65.6% of all bad bot traffic. This breed of bot uses the latest evasion techniques, including cycling through random IPs, entering through anonymous proxies, changing identities, and mimicking human behavior to evade detection.</p> <p>Bad bots enable high-speed abuse, misuse, and attacks on websites, mobile apps, and APIs. Successful attacks can lead to the theft of personal information, credit card data, and loyalty points. For organizations, automated abuse and online fraud contributes to non-compliance with data privacy and transaction regulations. Bad bot traffic is rising at a time when organizations are investing in improving customer experiences online. It's resulted in more digital services, new online functionality, and the development of expansive API ecosystems. Unfortunately, this array of new endpoints is a ripe target for automated attacks by bad bot operators.</p> <p>"Businesses cannot overlook the impact of malicious bot activity as it is contributing to more account compromise, higher infrastructure and support costs, customer churn, and degraded online services," says Ryan Windham, VP, Application Security, Imperva. "With automated fraud growing in intensity and</p>

complexity, advanced bot protection is essential for preventing the growing threat digital businesses and consumers face from bad bots.”

Key findings

- **Account takeover increased 148% in 2021:** In 2021, 64.1% of [ATO attacks](#) used an advanced bad bot. Financial Services was the most targeted industry (34.6%), followed by Travel (23.2%). The United States was the leading origin country of ATO attacks (54%) in 2021. The implications of account takeover are extensive; successful attacks lock customers out of their account, while fraudsters gain access to sensitive information that can be stolen and abused. For businesses, ATO contributes to revenue loss, risk of non-compliance with data privacy regulations, and tarnished reputations.
- **Travel, retail, and financial services targeted by bad bots:** The volume of attacks originating from sophisticated bad bots was most notable across Travel (34.2%), Retail (33.8%), and Financial Services (8.8%) in 2021. These industries remain a prime target because of the valuable personal data they store behind user login portals on their websites and mobile apps.
- **Proportion of bad bot traffic varies by country:** In 2021, Germany (39.6%), Singapore (39.1%), and Canada (30.2%) experienced the highest volumes of bad bot traffic, while the United States (29.1%) and United Kingdom (29.7%) were also higher than the global average (27.7%) of bad bot traffic.
- **35.6% of bad bots hide as mobile web browsers:** Mobile user agents were a popular disguise for bad bot traffic in 2021, accounting for more than one-third of all internet traffic, increasing from 28.1% in 2020. Mobile Safari was a popular agent in 2021 because bots exploited the browser’s improved user privacy settings to mask their behavior, making them harder to detect.

The research concludes that no industry was immune to bad bot activity in 2021. While examples of bots hoarding popular gaming consoles or clogging vaccine appointment scheduling sites made headlines in 2021, any level of bot traffic on a website can cause significant downtime, degrade performance, and reduce service reliability.

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HEADLINE	05/19 Spyware vendors target Android users
SOURCE	https://www.wired.com/story/android-spyware-cytrox-predator-google-tag/
GIST	<p>NSO GROUP AND its powerful Pegasus malware have dominated the debate over commercial spyware vendors who sell their hacking tools to governments, but researchers and tech companies are increasingly sounding the alarm about activity in the wider surveillance-for-hire industry. As part of this effort, Google's Threat Analysis Group is publishing details on Thursday of three campaigns that used the popular Predator spyware, developed by the North Macedonian firm Cytrox, to target Android users.</p> <p>In line with findings on Cytrox published in December by researchers at University of Toronto’s Citizen Lab, TAG saw evidence that state-sponsored actors who bought the Android exploits were located in Egypt, Armenia, Greece, Madagascar, Côte d’Ivoire, Serbia, Spain, and Indonesia. And there may have been other customers. The hacking tools took advantage of five previously unknown Android vulnerabilities, as well as known flaws that had fixes available but that victims hadn’t patched.</p> <p>“It’s important to shine some light on the surveillance vendor ecosystem and how these exploits are being sold,” says Google TAG director Shane Huntley. “We want to reduce the ability of both the vendors and the governments and other actors who buy their products to throw around these dangerous zero-days without any cost. If there’s no regulation and no downside to using these capabilities, then you’ll see it more and more.”</p> <p>The commercial spyware industry has given governments that don’t have the funds or expertise to develop their own hacking tools access to an expansive array of products and surveillance services. This allows repressive regimes and law enforcement more broadly to acquire tools that enable them to surveil dissidents, human rights activists, journalists, political opponents, and regular citizens. And while a lot of attention has been focused on spyware that targets Apple’s iOS, Android is the dominant operating system worldwide and has been facing similar exploitation attempts.</p>

	<p>“We just want to protect users and find this activity as quickly as possible,” Huntley says. “We don’t think we can find everything all the time, but we can slow these actors down.”</p> <p>TAG says it currently tracks more than 30 surveillance-for-hire vendors that have ranging levels of public presence and offer an array of exploits and surveillance tools. In the three Predator campaigns TAG examined, attackers sent Android users one-time links over email that looked like they had been shortened with a standard URL shortener. The attacks were targeted, focusing on just a few dozen potential victims. If a target clicked on the malicious link, it took them to a malicious page that automatically began deploying the exploits before quickly redirecting them to a legitimate website. On that malicious page, attackers deployed “Alien,” Android malware designed to load Cytrox’s full spyware tool, Predator.</p> <p>As is the case with iOS, such attacks on Android require exploiting a series of operating system vulnerabilities in sequence. By deploying fixes, operating system makers can break these attack chains, sending spyware vendors back to the drawing board to develop new or modified exploits. But while this makes it more difficult for attackers, the commercial spyware industry has still been able to flourish.</p> <p>“We can’t lose sight of the fact that NSO Group or any one of these vendors is just one piece of a broader ecosystem,” says John Scott-Railton, a senior researcher at Citizen Lab. “We need collaboration between platforms so that enforcement actions and mitigations cover the full scope of what these commercial players are doing and make it harder for them to continue.”</p>
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HEADLINE	05/19 Canada bans Huawei from 5G networks
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/may/19/canada-bans-chinas-huawei-technologies-from-5g-net/
GIST	<p>TORONTO (AP) — Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s government has decided to ban China’s Huawei Technologies from Canada’s next-generation mobile networks.</p> <p>The development of 5G, or fifth-generation, networks will give people speedier online connections and provide vast data capacity to meet ravenous demand as more and more things link to the internet and innovations such as virtual reality, immersive gaming and autonomous vehicles emerge.</p> <p>The U.S. has long pressed Trudeau’s government to deny Huawei a role in building the country’s 5G infrastructure, saying it would allow Beijing to spy on Canadians more easily.</p> <p>The move was confirmed Thursday by a spokesman for Canadian Public Safety Minister Marco Mendicino.</p> <p>Huawei is the biggest global supplier of network gear for phone and internet companies. It has been a symbol of China’s progress in becoming a technological world power - and a subject of U.S. security and law enforcement concerns. Some analysts say Chinese companies have flouted international rules and norms and stolen technology.</p> <p>China, the U.S. and Canada completed what was effectively a high-stakes prisoner swap last year involving a top executive from Huawei who was charged with fraud. China jailed two Canadians shortly after Canada arrested Meng Wanzhou, Huawei Technologies’ chief financial officer and the daughter of the company’s founder, on a U.S. extradition request.</p> <p>Many countries labeled China’s action “hostage politics,” while China has described the charges against Huawei and Meng as a politically motivated attempt to hold back China’s economic and technological development.</p>
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HEADLINE	05/19 Pro-Russia hackers spread hoaxes
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/may/19/pro-russian-hackers-spread-hoaxes-to-divide-ukrain/

As Ukrainians flooded into Poland earlier this year to flee Russian invaders, a hacking group aligned with the Kremlin sought to spread rumors that criminal gangs were waiting to harvest the organs of child refugees.

The network, known to cybersecurity experts as Ghostwriter, seemingly aimed to sow distrust between Ukraine and Poland. It's one of several tactics outlined in a new report that outlines how Russia has used disinformation, fear and propaganda alongside bullets, tanks and soldiers in an effort to demoralize Ukraine and divide its allies.

The unfounded claim made its way into Russian-state media and online platforms popular with far-right groups in the U.S., where posts spreading the hoax have been shared many thousands of times on sites like Telegram and Twitter. The disinformation operation exploited legitimate concerns that Ukrainian refugees could be kidnapped by human traffickers, but no evidence of organ harvesting has surfaced.

"Ghostwriter operations will often piggyback on news stories or recent events," said Alden Wahlstrom, a senior analyst at Mandiant, the cyber security firm that published the report Thursday. "There are certain motives that are consistent: Undercutting trust in NATO. Creating tensions."

The report detailed several other Russian-aligned disinformation and propaganda campaigns, including bogus online claims that Ukrainian President Vladimir Zelenskyy had committed suicide or fled Ukraine. In some cases, the campaigns relied on Russian state media or fake social media accounts to disseminate the disinformation. Mandiant also identified cases in which groups linked to Russian intelligence disguised their disinformation as independent journalism. Russian diplomats have also emerged as a key vector for disinformation.

In one instance in March, groups linked to Russia spread claims online that Zelenskyy had surrendered on the same day he was preparing to address the U.S. Congress.

"Influence efforts and propaganda are used to shape public opinion, to impact the morale of participants in a conflict," said Renee DiResta, research manager at the Stanford Internet Observatory and an expert on disinformation and social media. DiResta said Russia relies on this sophisticated network to "wage narrative warfare around the globe."

Ghostwriter has been linked to Belarus, a key Russian ally. The network was also blamed for attempting to hack into the social media accounts of dozens of Ukrainian officers earlier this year. That operation was revealed by Meta, the parent company of Facebook, who said the hackers were foiled before they could use the officers' accounts to post videos of surrendering Ukrainian soldiers.

The organ harvesting hoax was further amplified by Russian state media and ultimately seeped into English-language websites and platforms. It can now be found on major platforms including Twitter and Telegram, where Russian forces are portrayed as the saviors of trafficking victims.

"The pro-Russian government... foiled a massive kidnapping plot organized by organ traffickers," reads one example on Twitter. "US Government is complicit," reads another post, from a user in Texas.

Mandiant's report also highlighted pro-Chinese and Iranian disinformation networks that sought to leverage the war in Ukraine for their own ends.

The pro-Chinese network amplified a discredited Russian claim that the U.S. was running secret bioweapon research in Ukraine. That claim is similar to ones spread by Chinese officials who sought to blame the U.S. for the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Iranian network, by contrast, seemingly sought to create tensions between Russians and Israel by spreading claims that Israel had taken Ukraine's side in the conflict.

In both cases, researchers at Mandiant stopped short of attributing the work to government agencies in either Iran or China, noting the difficulty in proving such linkages. Nonetheless, Wahlstrom said, they are using online disinformation to further Iran and China's objectives, and using Russia's invasion to do it.

"They're parroting official Russian narratives," Wahlstrom told The AP. "They've also given it their own twist."

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Terror Conditions

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HEADLINE	05/20 Youngest convicted for terrorism in UK
SOURCE	https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-tees-61521771
GIST	<p>A boy who talked about carrying out a right-wing terrorism attack on an orphanage has been sentenced.</p> <p>The boy, from Darlington, was 13 when he said he wanted to carry out a school shooting and owned manuals detailing how to make explosives and weapons, Newton Aycliffe Youth Court heard.</p> <p>He is one of the youngest convicted terrorists in the UK.</p> <p>The boy was ordered to complete a "high-intensity" referral order for 12 months after admitting three charges.</p> <p>Columbine shooting</p> <p>The boy, who is now aged 14 and cannot legally be identified, admitted having three documents found on his bedroom computer which detailed how to make various "viable" explosives, prosecutors said.</p> <p>He also downloaded instructions on how to make a "DIY self-loading pistol", the court heard.</p> <p>Prosecutor Jane Stansfield said police were alerted after an Instagram user, later identified to be the boy, sent messages saying he was "planning on blowing up an orphanage" and was seeking firearms like those used in the Columbine shooting which the teenager had a keen interest in.</p> <p>She said the boy made repeated searches about the 1999 US school shooting and used images of the two Columbine killers as his profile image on a communications app.</p> <p>In messages he said he "liked Columbine and wanted to start a series of events just like it", the court heard.</p> <p>Ms Stansfield said he regularly used "racist, anti-Semitic and anti-Islamic language" and made contact with other far-right extremists online.</p> <p>He also bought a Confederate flag, linked in the US to white supremacist groups, and posed for pictures in front of it while wearing camouflaged clothing and a face mask.</p> <p>Ms Stansfield said the boy's computer use started with an interest in the military that morphed into right-wing extremism, including downloading a picture of Adolf Hitler when he was 11.</p> <p>Police seized items including his computer, mobile phone, a portable hard-drive and military uniform when they raided his home on 1 July 2021.</p> <p>'Naivety and vulnerability'</p> <p>Stephen Andrews, in mitigation, said the boy accepted he was "so stupid" and insisted he would never and "could never" have carried out any of the acts he discussed.</p>

Mr Andrews said the boy had become "extremely isolated" from his school friends and "latched on" to groups and ideologies that "almost gave him something of a persona and identity".

He said the boy showed signs of "extreme naivety and vulnerability" coupled with "elements of sophistication" and "ideas and access to information one wouldn't normally associate with somebody of his age", but he had the "capacity and willingness to reform".

Senior District Judge Paul Goldspring said the boy either had a "fantastical mind" not "linked to reality" or he would be "one of the most dangerous young persons around".

The judge said although the custody threshold had been crossed, he did not consider the boy to be dangerous.

He said almost every minority group was targeted by the boy's "vitriol" and his actions online had been "very alarming" but there was no evidence he actually planned to carry out an attack by, for example, buying a gun or scoping out a school.

He said although the boy had not officially been diagnosed with autism, he had suffered a number of "traumatic events" and had neuro-development difficulties which meant he could "easily be influenced" and he "did not function at the same intellectual level as most 13 or 14-year-olds".

The judge said the boy had already made "rehabilitative" progress which would be undone by a custody term.

As well as the referral order, the boy was also ordered to pay £167 in prosecution costs and a court surcharge.

Speaking after the sentencing, Det Supt Matt Davison, from Counter Terrorism Policing North East, urged anyone with [concerns about someone potentially becoming radicalised](#) to report those worries early.

"We know it can seem like a big step to share your worries but in many cases the right support will come through education and health professionals and there isn't a need for further police involvement," he said.

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HEADLINE	05/19 India convicts Kashmiri separatist leader
SOURCE	https://www.globalvillagespace.com/india-convicts-yasin-malik-of-terrorism/
GIST	<p>An Indian court on Thursday convicted Kashmiri separatist leader Yasin Malik in a terror funding case that carries a maximum sentence of the death penalty or life imprisonment.</p> <p>He had been charged with “terrorist” acts, illegally raising funds, being a member of a “terrorist organisation,” criminal conspiracy, and sedition, Aljazeera reported.</p> <p>Special Judge Praveen Singh directed the National Investigation Agency (NIA) authorities to assess Malik’s financial situation and told Malik to provide an affidavit regarding his financial assets. He has posted the matter for arguments on the quantum of sentence on May 25.</p> <p>According to his organization, the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), Malik told the court that “Terrorism-related charges leveled against me are concocted, fabricated and politically motivated.”</p> <p>He said, “If seeking Azadi (freedom) is a crime, then I am ready to accept this crime and its consequences.”</p>

	<p>The Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) was one of the first armed rebel groups to come into existence in the Indian-occupied Kashmir. The group, led by Malik, gave up armed rebellion in the disputed region in 1994.</p> <p>In 2019, the Indian government arrested Malik, banned the JKLF, and stripped Indian-administered Kashmir of its special status.</p> <p>A day earlier, Islamabad strongly condemned India for framing fabricated charges against Malik, who is currently imprisoned at Tihar jail by the Indian authorities, and submitted a demarche to the Indian Charge d' Affaires (Cd'A).</p> <p>The statement said that in a bid to suppress the voice of the indigenous Kashmiri leadership, the Indian government had resorted to implicating them in fictitious and motivated cases.</p> <p>The FO spokesperson said, neither the malevolent Indian tactics of conjuring up false charges against Kashmiri leadership nor the environment of persecution, repression, and intimidation could quash the relentless struggle of the Kashmiris.</p> <p>Islamabad also urged the international community “to counsel India to drop all fabricated charges against all political leaders of IIOJK including Mr. Yasin Malik, ensure their safety and well-being, and provide them complete legal protections, including the right to a free and fair trial.”</p>
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HEADLINE	05/19 Extremists exploit gaming, social media
SOURCE	https://www.boisestatepublicradio.org/2022-05-19/extremists-exploit-gaming-networks-and-social-media-to-recruit-and-radicalize
GIST	<p>The suspect who allegedly carried out the attack in Buffalo, New York, grocery store mounted a camera to his helmet and livestreamed on Twitch as he shot 13 people, killing 10.</p> <p>The livestream was taken down within two minutes, but the video was shared across the internet and viewed millions of times. It's a stark reminder of how extremists can exploit gaming platforms to promote violence and recruit and radicalize gamers.</p> <p>In 2019, a gunman in Christchurch, New Zealand, went live on Facebook before he shot and killed 51 people at local mosques. And that same year, a gunman in Germany livestreamed his attack on Twitch.</p> <p>Alex Newhouse, deputy director at the Middlebury Institute Center on Terrorism, Extremism, and Counterterrorism, points out that the violence is not linked to the games themselves.</p> <p>“We’ve had decades now of studies showing that the actual content of video games doesn’t actually have that much link to real world violence,” says Newhouse. “So violent video games aren’t actually linked to violence in the real world.”</p> <p>The problem, he says, is that the last two decades made it clear that games are social networks, not just content. With video games and the internet come platforms built to facilitate social interaction and relationships.</p> <p>And extremists have also realized that these platforms often lag behind bigger social media platforms in terms of content moderation, Newhouse says.</p> <p>“So they’re able to use gaming platforms, because of those vulnerabilities, to radicalize people and also to mobilize existing extremists,” he says.</p> <p>Interview Highlights On how a young person might be recruited to a right-wing group through a gaming platform</p>

“You’ll often get a cell of extremists who will go into a gaming chat room or a party chat in Fortnite or a group in Call of Duty, for instance, and they’ll use racial slurs or some other type of extremist content. ... They’ll monitor the people in those group chats and see who is responding positively with laughter, maybe asking questions about the certain use of these specific extremist terms. And then the people who respond well to that will be invited into a deeper group chat. So they’ll go through these series of filters from the broad public and end with people who have been basically cultivated to respond positively to extremist stimuli.

“It happens through other ways as well. We’ve seen it happening where groups within the platform will interact with one another to make it look like they are a bigger organization than they actually are, which gives the feeling to potential new recruits of being important. There’s almost sort of like an organic magnetism towards those types of networks as well.”

On what gaming companies are doing in response

“They are investing in a lot of counter-radicalization, a lot of disruption enforcement mechanisms. Content moderation is being invested in at rates never before seen. The problem is, especially within the gaming industry, there are dozens of different companies, most of which have nowhere near the resources of the big companies.

“As a result, a lot of these smaller companies are suddenly finding themselves on the vanguard of trying to disrupt extremist radicalization. And they simply do not have the resources. They do not have the knowledge. So there are burgeoning efforts now to create coalitions of companies and experts to try to pool resources. But it’s still in its infancy, and we can say pretty definitively that the games industry is still pretty far behind social media giants.”

On games developed by extremists that show racist and anti-Semitic violence

“Extremists have been dabbling in the creation of games since the early 2000s, if not even before. The games themselves can come in the form of standalone games that you go and buy on a storefront. Or they can actually be sort of smaller, bite-sized experiences that are built within game creation platforms like Roblox or Minecraft even.

“And these games can be used as radicalization pipelines themselves. Some of the examples that have been mentioned before and that I’ve studied myself include things like re-enactments of concentration camps in Roblox, that are designed, again, to find people who are potentially willing to engage more in that type of highly virulent activity.”

On whether the Buffalo shooting may prompt game-adjacent social media companies, such as Twitch, to respond

“It’s still a very reactive industry, but I do think that an event like this will have that sort of catalyzing force for moving in a better direction. I’ve been contacted by companies and other organizations about this issue over the past week, so that’s at least a good sign.”

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HEADLINE	05/20 Europol targets terrorist, extremist chants
SOURCE	https://www.hstoday.us/subject-matter-areas/counterterrorism/terrorist-and-extremist-chants-targeted-in-soundcloud-action/
GIST	<p>Between May 5 and 13, a large-scale Referral Action Day targeting terrorist and extremist audio content online took place involving Europol’s European Counter Terrorism Centre (ECTC) and six countries.</p> <p>In collaboration with the music entertainment company SoundCloud, the participating countries and the ECTC’s European Union Internet Referral Unit (EU-IRU) detected and assisted the company to scour illegally uploaded jihadist, right wing terrorist and violent extremist propaganda.</p>

Return to Top	<p>Some 1,100 profiles and audio files assessed as illegal were flagged to SoundCloud. Upon review, SoundCloud deleted the reported files that were considered a breach of its terms and conditions.</p> <p>Among the referred content were jihadist chants in several languages as well as audio fragments promoting violent and right wing extremist groups. Some of these materials had already amassed several thousand hits and audio streams.</p> <p>The action was put in motion by the German Federal Criminal Police Office (Bundeskriminalamt) and the EU-IRU, with the involvement of law enforcement authorities from Denmark, Hungary, Portugal, Spain and the United Kingdom.</p> <p>This referral action day is part of an ongoing public-private partnership between SoundCloud, law enforcement agencies and Europol aiming at addressing the terrorist abuse of the internet, preventing online radicalization and safeguarding fundamental rights.</p>
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HEADLINE	05/19 Taliban: female TV presenters to cover face
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/19/taliban-orders-female-afghan-tv-presenters-to-cover-faces-on-air
GIST	<p>Afghanistan's Taliban rulers have ordered all female TV presenters to cover their faces on air, the country's biggest media outlet has said.</p> <p>The order came in a statement from the Taliban's virtue and vice ministry, tasked with enforcing the group's rulings, as well as from the information and culture ministry, the Tolo news channel tweeted on Thursday. The statement called the order "final and non-negotiable", the channel said.</p> <p>The statement was sent to the Moby Group, which owns Tolo and several other TV and radio networks. The tweet said it was being applied to other Afghan media as well.</p> <p>A local media official confirmed his station had received the order and was told it was not up for discussion. He said the station had no other option. He spoke on the condition that he and his station not be identified for fear of problems with the authorities.</p> <p>Several female anchors and presenters posted their photos on social media showing themselves with their faces covered with face masks while they presented programmes.</p> <p>One prominent Tolo presenter, Yalda Ali, posted a video of herself putting on a face mask with a caption: "A woman being erased, on orders from the virtue and vice ministry."</p> <p>On one station, Shamshad TV, implementation of the order was mixed. One female anchor appeared with a face mask on Thursday, while another later in the day went without, showing her face.</p> <p>During the Taliban's first stint in power from 1996 to 2001, they imposed overwhelming restrictions on women, requiring them to wear the all-encompassing burqa that even covered the eyes with a mesh and barring them from public life and education.</p> <p>After they seized power again in Afghanistan in August last year, the Taliban initially appeared to have moderated somewhat their restrictions, not announcing a dress code for women. But in recent weeks, they have taken a sharp, hardline pivot that has confirmed the worst fears of rights activists.</p> <p>Earlier this month, the Taliban ordered all women in public to wear head-to-toe clothing that leaves only their eyes visible. The decree said women should leave the home only when necessary and that male relatives would face punishment for women's dress code violations, starting with a summons and escalating to court hearings and jail time.</p>

	The Taliban also issued a decree barring girls from attending school after the sixth grade, reversing previous promises by Taliban officials that girls of all ages would be allowed an education.
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HEADLINE	05/20 FBI fails at white supremacist violence?
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/may/20/fbi-white-supremacist-violence-michael-german
GIST	<p>The Federal Bureau of Investigation is failing to address the rising scourge of white supremacist violence despite stark warnings that such attacks pose the greatest domestic terrorism threat in the US, a leading authority on law enforcement has told the Guardian.</p> <p>Michael German, a former FBI special agent who infiltrated white supremacist groups in the 1990s, said the bureau continues to underplay the scope of the threat. As a result, communities targeted by white supremacists and far-right militia groups – such as the largely African American neighborhood of Buffalo, New York, where 10 people were killed by a suspected racist gunman this week – are left fatally exposed.</p> <p>“US law enforcement is failing, as it long has, to provide victimized communities like Buffalo’s with equal protection under the law. They are not actually investigating the crimes that occur,” said German, a fellow with the Brennan Center at NYU School of Law.</p> <p>Saturday’s mass shooting in Buffalo was allegedly carried out by a white gunman who selected the Tops supermarket because it served one of the largest Black populations in the state. In a 180-page diatribe he is believed to have posted online, he espoused the false racist belief that white Americans are being “replaced” by immigrants of colour.</p> <p>Numerous recent studies have pinpointed white supremacy as the greatest domestic terrorism threat in America today. The FBI itself has sounded the alarm, with its former director Christopher Wray telling Congress in 2020 that “racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists” were the main source of ideological killings, superseding jihadists.</p> <p>In an interview with the Guardian, German said that US law enforcement in general, and the FBI in particular, were lagging behind. Despite a clear mandate from Congress, the bureau has yet to produce statistics revealing the scale of white supremacist crimes.</p> <p>“White supremacists kill far more Americans than anybody else the FBI designates as domestic terrorists, yet the bureau still doesn’t document the crimes and fatalities that occur.”</p> <p>He added: “I think that’s a reflection of lack of concern for the victims of that violence.”</p> <p>The US attorney general, Merrick Garland, put out a statement after Buffalo in which he pledged to seek justice for the innocent victims. He said the justice department (DoJ) would treat the massacre as a “hate crime and an act of racially motivated violent extremism”.</p> <p>In German’s opinion, both these designations – “hate crime” and “racially motivated violent extremism” – are problematic in terms of how they are routinely applied to white supremacist incidents. Most acts that are deemed to be hate crimes are deferred by the DoJ to state and local police for investigation, though 85% of those agencies do not recognize hate crimes as a phenomenon.</p> <p>“Police in these jurisdictions don’t record or may not even investigate hate crimes, so the incident gets lost,” German said.</p> <p>The invisibility of white supremacist hatred to law enforcement is reflected in those official figures that do exist. In recent years, surveys based on the experiences of crime victims themselves have recorded more than 200,000 hate crime incidents each year.</p> <p>Compare that with the average number of hate crime cases prosecuted by the DoJ annually – 21.</p>

“Racially motivated violent extremism” is also less than helpful as a designation, German said. Though it is classed as terrorism, it is a catchall in which white supremacy groups are lumped together with Black nationalists and those classified as “Black identity extremists”.

The end result is that the spotlight that should be tightly focused on the growing threat of white supremacy is diffused. Federal resources are scattered between animal rights groups, native American protesters, non-violent civil disobedience movements, even pro-abortion groups designated as terrorist entities, though there is no evidence such groups exist.

Meanwhile, organized criminal groups dedicated to upholding white power fly largely beneath the radar. There is a dramatic contrast with the overweening surveillance that was aimed at Muslim communities after 9/11, German said. He pointed to the many telltale signs that the Buffalo suspect appears to have offered months before Saturday’s attack.

He announced a “murder/suicide” mission at his school that was referred to state police. According to the [Washington Post](#), the matter was dropped after the individual reassured them he had been “joking”.

“Can you imagine if the Buffalo shooter had been Muslim, and he was telling his friends he was enamored with Osama bin Laden,” German said. “You have to think the response would have been different.”

German said it was puzzling that an institution like the FBI that had effectively turned itself into a counter-terrorism intelligence agency after 9/11 was, by contrast, so lax in its handling of white supremacy. One factor, he said, was that the FBI displays the prejudices of American society writ large: “we fail to recognize how foundational white supremacism is to our culture,” he said.

FBI agents are also overwhelmingly white and male, and the bureau has been infused with elements of white supremacist ideology stretching back decades. German knows that from personal experience.

“When I was going undercover in the 1990s I was warned about sympathy towards white supremacy among officers – that was raised as a hazard for my undercover operation.”

In 2006 the FBI drew up an [internal intelligence assessment](#) that found that “white supremacist presence among law enforcement personnel is a concern”. It said that organized groups were infiltrating law enforcement agencies, while individuals sympathetic to “white supremacist causes” were also joining the ranks.

That was 16 years ago. To this day there has been no national effort to root out the infection.

“If there had been an internal FBI report that Isis had infiltrated US law enforcement, you’d expect a nationwide attempt to get to the bottom of it,” German said.

Given the devastating nature of the Buffalo shootings – and Joe Biden’s promise to the victims’ families that “hate will not prevail” – the DoJ is likely to devote resources to this particular investigation. But German warns that the underlying tendency to under-record and underestimate the scope of white supremacist criminal activity shows no sign of changing.

What does that do to people of color who are the targets of all the hatred? “It creates a recognition for these communities that they have to solve their own problems. They know that law enforcement, the FBI included, treat them harshly when they are suspects and ignore them when they are victims.”

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Suspicious, Unusual

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HEADLINE	05/18 Saudi Arabia is betting big on golf
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SOURCE	https://time.com/6177593/pgs-championship-phil-mickelson-saudi-tour/
GIST	<p>Golf, that genteel game, rarely finds itself swept up by the geopolitical flares of its day. But on the eve of this year's PGA Championship, which tees off in Tulsa, Okla., on May 19, America's institutional stronghold over the sport is being threatened by one of the most controversial countries on the globe. While the eyes of the golf world turn to Tulsa, the government of Saudi Arabia, of all places, still looms very large over the game.</p> <p>Saudi Arabia has never been a golf hotbed. But the kingdom is now trying to grow the game. LIV Golf Investments, an entity backed by Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund, the PIF, launched last year, with former world No. 1 Greg Norman—a two-time major champion—as its CEO. In March, LIV Golf Investments announced the start of the LIV Golf Invitational Series, which promises to dish out \$255 million in total purse money, across eight events. "Shot Just Got Real," LIV Golf says on its website. "We exist to supercharge the game of golf."</p> <p>Each event will feature 48 players, who will play three instead of the four rounds standard on the PGA Tour. The winner of each of the seven "regular-season events" receives \$4 million; by contrast, the winner of the PGA Championship, a major, gets \$2.16 million. The total purse of each LIV event is \$25 million; the PGA Championship total purse is half that, at \$12 million. The best individual performer across the LIV Golf competition earns \$18 million; equal to what the champion of the PGA Tour's season-ending competition, the FedEx Cup, will earn: LIV Golf, however, throws in a team competition in its last event. A team winning team of four splits a \$16 million first prize; the total purse for the team final is \$50 million.</p> <p>The Phil Mickelson controversy</p> <p>These eye-popping figures have attracted the attention of the world's best golfers. Defending PGA Championship winner Phil Mickelson, for example, told author Alan Shipnuck, whose biography of Mickelson was released Tuesday, that he and three other nameless "top players" paid for lawyers to write the LIV Golf operating agreement. Saudi Arabia's critics have labeled the kingdom's massive recent investment in sports like golf and Formula 1 as a classic example of "sports washing," or using the sheen of sports as a way of whitewashing an autocratic nation's human rights record. According to a U.S. intelligence report, for example, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman approved the assassination of Washington <i>Post</i> journalist Jamal Khashoggi, a U.S. resident. Mickelson, according to Shipnuck, told him he agreed with the sports washing assessment. But Saudi riches were too good to ignore.</p> <p>"They're scary mother***** to get involved with," Mickelson told Shipnuck. "We know they killed Khashoggi and have a horrible record on human rights. They execute people over there for being gay. Knowing all of this, why would I even consider it? Because this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to reshape how the PGA Tour operates. They've been able to get by with manipulative, coercive, strong-arm tactics because we, the players, had no recourse. As nice a guy as [PGA Tour commissioner Jay Monahan] comes across as, unless you have leverage, he won't do what's right. And the Saudi money has finally given us that leverage. I'm not sure I even want [the Saudi golf tour] to succeed, but just the idea of it is allowing us to get things done with the [PGA] Tour."</p> <p>Mickelson, one of the most popular players in golf, who captivated the country by becoming the oldest player, at 50, to win a major championship, has taken a hiatus after those comments were published in February. He also apologized saying: "I used words I sincerely regret that do not reflect my true feelings or intentions. It was reckless, I offended people, and I am deeply sorry for my choice of words."</p> <p>Mickelson, long a fan-favorite who at last year's PGA made history by becoming the oldest player, at 50, to win a major, won't defend his title in Oklahoma; sponsors such as Workday and KPMG have dropped him. Shipnuck has reported that Mickelson lost \$40 million gambling from 2010-2014.</p> <p>While LIV Golf has not announced its player roster ahead of its first event, June 9-11 in London, at least one other major champion has expressed interest. After becoming upset with a ruling in the first round of the Wells Fargo Championship in early May, Sergio Garcia told an official, "I can't wait to leave this</p>

[tour](#). I can't wait to get out of here. A couple of more weeks and I won't have to deal with you anymore." Garcia requested a release from the PGA Tour to participate in the London event.

The PGA Tour has treated LIV Golf as a rogue competitor, particularly because five of the events will be held on the Tour's home soil, the United States. Two of the LIV Golf events will be held at clubs owned by former U.S. President Donald Trump, who while in office [said](#), "we may never know all of the facts surrounding the murder of Mr. Jamal Khashoggi. In any case, our relationship is with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia." The July 29-31 event will be held at the Trump National Golf Club in Bedminster, N.J., the site that was slated to host this week's PGA Championship. The PGA of America, however, announced it was moving the major out of Bedminster on Jan. 25, 2021, in the days following the Jan. 6 Capitol riots. In a May 10 memo sent to its players, the PGA Tour said it was [denying a conflicting-event release for the LIV event in London](#). LIV Golf doubled down, announcing a \$2 billion investment and an expansion of the invitational events to 10 tournaments in 2023, and 14 tournaments in '24 and '25.

'It's grotesque'

LIV Golf, however, didn't help its cause last week, when Norman appeared to downplay Khashoggi's murder. "Look, we've all made mistakes, and you just want to learn by those mistakes and how you can correct them going forward," Norman said at an event in London.

Norman's remarks received swift condemnation. "Would you say that if it was your loved one? How can we go forward when those who ordered the murder are still unpunished, and continue to try to buy back their legitimacy?" Khashoggi's fiancée, Hatice Cengiz [told the Telegraph](#). "We should not fall for their wealth and lies, and lose our morals and common humanity. We should all be insisting on the truth and justice; only then can we look forward with hope and dignity."

"It's grotesque," says Sarah Leah Whitson, executive director of Democracy for the Arab World Now (DAWN), a non-profit founded by Khashoggi in 2018. "It's grotesque that Greg is seeking to justify a very lucrative business deal with a very troublesome, disturbing public fund." Whitson believes Saudi sports washing is still at its nascent stages. "Do you think they're going to stop at golf?" says Whitson. "They're not. They have a bottomless pit of money, and every day that fuel prices go up, it gives them billions more to buy up these image-polishing assets."

Saudi Arabia has marketed its sports spending as a key component of ["Vision 2030,"](#) the kingdom's effort at economic diversification and modernization. Whitson, however, shares a message for American sports fans considering attending one of the LIV events (June 30-July 2 in Portland, Ore., July 29-31 in Bedminster, N.J., Sept. 2-4 in Boston, Sept. 16-18 in Chicago, and Oct. 27-30 at Trump National Doral in Miami). "Take ownership," Whitson says. "If you go to a Saudi government, Mohammad bin Salman-controlled and operated golf event, he wants you there to normalize him. And when you go there, you normalize him."

Remember last month at the Masters, when Tiger Woods had a [fine first round](#), and gave golf hope that he could write another comeback story for the ages? The sport can use his spark at the PGA this weekend. Anything—anything—to distract from the geopolitical mess it has on its hands.

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HEADLINE	05/19 Climate suicides: wave of 'doomerism'
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/may/19/climate-suicides-despair-global-heating
GIST	<p>It was a stunning, grisly act. A man, a climate activist and Buddhist, had set himself on fire on the steps of the US supreme court. He sat upright and didn't immediately scream despite the agony. Police officers desperately plunged nearby orange traffic cones into the court's marbled fountain and hurled water at him. It wasn't enough to save him.</p> <p>The death of Wynn Bruce, a 50-year-old photographer who lived in Boulder, Colorado, was a shock to those who knew him. "It was so upsetting," said April Lyons, a psychotherapist who knew Bruce from a</p>

therapeutic dance class they both took. “He was a solid person, a compassionate, kind person. We had no idea he’d do this.”

Bruce’s father, Douglas, [said](#) he was sure the self-immolation – on 22 April, which is Earth Day – was “a fearless act of compassion about his concern for the environment”. There is no explicit evidence of this, although Bruce had posted [a fire emoji to Facebook](#) along with the Earth Day date of his upcoming suicide.

To some, though, the terrible act was an indication of the curdling anguish that many people now harbor over the escalating climate crisis. Bruce’s death felt hauntingly familiar.

Four years ago nearly to the exact date, David Buckel, a civil rights lawyer, walked to New York City’s Prospect Park early one morning, doused himself with gasoline and set himself alight. Unlike Bruce, Buckel, who was 60, left a two-page note emailed to media outlets minutes before his death stating that “my early death by fossil fuel reflects what we are doing to ourselves.”

Bruce’s death “did make me think of what David did and also the incredible pain this sort of act causes the people who love them”, said Terry Kaelber, who was Buckel’s husband. The duo were vegetarians and dutifully did their recycling. Buckel, [a keen composter](#), had become somewhat [agitated](#) about environmental depredation. “You can never expect this, though,” said Kaelber. “My heart pours out to Wynn’s family.”

The deaths also provoked a sense of frustration that such horrific acts are not only contemplated, but then have an ephemeral impact when they do occur. Kaelber said that after the flowers of condolence were cleared from near the scorched grass of Prospect Park, some climate activists took to wearing red ribbons to remind others of Buckel’s sacrifice. But that, too, soon faded.

“We have no leaders on this issue, none, no one,” Kaelber said. “So I get the despair people have but the answer isn’t to do what they did. They could’ve had more impact joining with people who are driving for change. Imagine if Wynn had chained himself and 100 Buddhists to the gates of the supreme court instead.

“They think doing this will galvanize people, and maybe it will a few people, but my first thought with Wynn was that no one on the supreme court will care. It will just be this passing thing in the media. It’s tragic.”

Few people worried about the climate crisis are driven to self-harm over it, of course, let alone set themselves aflame in an echo of Thich Quang Duc, the Vietnamese monk who self-immolated in protest against the persecution of Buddhists in 1963.

Instead, climate activists have marched in huge numbers, joined divestment campaigns, glued themselves to roads and chained themselves to oil drilling equipment. “It’s just so clear to me that I have to take this stand,” said Peter Kalmus, a Nasa climate scientist as he handcuffed himself to a JPMorgan Chase building during a protest in Los Angeles last month. “We are heading towards ****ing catastrophe – we are going to lose everything.”

Yet most of us who fret about climate change do so discreetly. Studies [have shown](#) that while alarm over worsening wildfires, droughts, flooding and societal unrest is on the rise, not many of us talk about climate angst with others, to avoid political arguments or simply avoid bringing down the mood.

Those who do speak out are often younger activists – [research has shown](#) that half of people between 16 and 25 years old believe the Earth may be doomed, while [three-quarters feel anxiety](#) when they think or hear about climate change. Some speak openly of [not wanting to bring children into a hotter, harsher world](#).

“Living in climate truth is like living in a nightmare. It’s absolutely horrible and I can understand why the vast majority of Americans don’t do it,” said Margaret Klein Salamon, a clinical psychologist turned climate activist. “But the worst part is that everyone’s acting normal – it’s like we are zombies. The sense of helplessness and hopelessness is holding back conversations and political action.”

Salamon leads an organization, called the Climate Awakening, that facilitates “climate emotions conversations” both in-person and virtually that encourage people to open up about their climate fears. Salamon said that many describe living in a sort of waking, powerless nightmare where an obvious catastrophe is unfolding but society just blithely ignores it.

“Some people have described it as like they are at a funeral but everyone else is treating it like a party,” said Salamon. “People are still going to college, planning for retirement, doing all the things as if the future will look just like the past when we know that’s not true. There’s a delusion of normalcy.”

There are regular attempts to jolt us free from political inertia, whether that’s the increasingly exasperated [excoriations](#) of the Swedish school striker turned movement leader Greta Thunberg, the soaring success of the Netflix film *Don’t Look Up*, which satirized the blase attitude of politicians and the media toward scientific warnings, or the increasingly frantic pronouncements of António Guterres, the secretary general of the United Nations, who has said continuing use of fossil fuels is “madness” and the work of “dangerous radicals”.

This desire to shake people from a pall of complacency may have also motivated Bruce and Buckel, although Susan Clayton, a professor of psychology and environmental studies at the College of Wooster, cautions it’s risky to assume the full motivations behind a suicide. As social creatures who feed off each other’s cues, however, we are all affected by what Clayton calls “collective ignorance”.

“If there’s a fire and we look around us and see no one is doing anything, you can feel you are also expected to do nothing, not realizing that other people are looking to you for the same reason,” she said. “There’s this sense that people around us are not only doing nothing about this problem, but not even acting like it’s important.”

For all the efforts of various activists, and promises by governments to restrain dangerous global heating, carbon emissions [leapt globally last year](#) as we reverted back to the polluting status quo before Covid lockdowns. Wildfires are now [a year-round menace](#) to the US west. On [Friday](#), it hit 51C in Pakistan, while India has baked in such extreme, record heat that dozens of people have died and birds are [falling](#) from the sky.

The UN has [warned](#) that a broken perception of risk based on “optimism, underestimation and invincibility” is fueling such disasters. Oil and gas companies are [planning](#), unhindered, a massive tranche of “carbon bomb” drilling [projects](#) that will propel us firmly towards climate catastrophe.

There is much to be anxious of, but some climate scientists argue we cannot let a wave of “doomerism” become paralyzing. There is still hope that concerted action will avoid the worst, that momentum is building for a cleaner, greener world. Activism is a good release valve for climate worries, Clayton said, not only to help confront the problem but as a forum to speak to others with similar concerns.

“Climate doomerism can be harmful, because it robs us of agency, the agency we still have in determining our future,” said Michael Mann, a climate scientist at Penn State University. “I fear that doomism and defeatism leads us down the path of inaction, or worse.

“It would be much better for folks to channel those emotions toward the common goal of speaking truth to power and holding our policymakers accountable for addressing the mounting climate crisis.”

To little public fanfare, two memorials were held for Wynn Bruce last week, one in Boulder and one in Minnesota, where his father still lives. Attendees spoke of his kindness and friendship. The media had

	<p>noted the manner of his death as a terrible curiosity, rather than dig into his motivations, and quickly moved on to other topics. The planet continued to heat up.</p> <p>“I don’t believe David or Wynn’s acts will drive change but maybe I’m wrong, and God bless them if it does,” said Kaelber. “But it really is no way to do things. There is a better way.”</p>
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HEADLINE	05/19 Study: shady web of online spider sales
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/19/science/spiders-tarantulas-arachnids-trade.html
GIST	<p>At first, it seems like any other unboxing video on YouTube: A young man presents the viewer with a sealed box, expresses his excitement at what might be inside and peels away the packing tape.</p> <p>But instead of pulling out a collectible toy or signature sneaker, he carefully unpacks seven live tarantulas, zooming in close enough to showcase the wispy bristles on their multijointed legs.</p> <p>The tarantulas were the highlight of a mail-order spider “mystery box,” a biological grab bag that has become a popular offering in the thriving arachnid economy, much of which now exists, fittingly, on the web.</p> <p>“You can buy yourself a mystery present of mystery spiders,” said Alice Hughes, a conservation biologist at the University of Hong Kong. “It’s like getting your deck of Pokémon cards: You might get a super rare one, or you might get a bunch of random stuff.”</p> <p>In a new paper, published in Communications Biology on Thursday, Dr. Hughes and her colleagues shine a light on the largely unregulated trade of creatures that prefer to lurk in the dark. Their analysis of online sales listings turned up more than 1,200 species of spiders, scorpions and other arachnids; just 2 percent of them are subject to international trade regulations, the researchers report.</p> <p>“Arachnids are being massively traded,” Dr. Hughes said. “And it seems to be going completely under the radar.”</p> <p>Many organisms in the arachnid marketplace appear to have been caught in the wild rather than bred in captivity, the study found, and the ecological impact of their harvest remains unknown.</p> <p>“They’re just being removed willy-nilly in large numbers,” said Anne Danielson-Francois, an arachnologist and behavioral ecologist at the University of Michigan-Dearborn who was not involved in the new research. She added, “They’re not this unlimited resource.”</p> <p>Although the wildlife trade is a major threat to the planet’s fauna, regulation and public attention tends to focus primarily on well-known, charismatic animals, such as elephants, parrots and sea turtles.</p> <p>But there’s a large and growing demand for invertebrates, experts said, and arachnids make popular pets. They are a cinch to ship — “You can literally mail an envelope of little spiderlings” Dr. Hughes said — and many species are relatively easy to care for.</p> <p>“They don’t bark, they don’t need to go for walks — you can set up a simple arachnid in a five-gallon tank on your shelf,” said Ernest Cooper, an independent wildlife-trade expert in Canada. “They have fascinating behaviors. Some have bright colors.”</p> <p>To learn more about the scale of the global arachnid trade, the authors of the new paper used a handful of search terms — “spider,” “scorpion,” “arachnid” — in nine languages to identify websites that might be selling the animals.</p>

After eliminating shops selling spider excavators or Spider-Man collectibles, they scraped the data from the remaining sites to generate a list of arachnid species for sale online. (They also used the Internet Archive to find historical sales listings dating back to 2002.)

Across these sites, the study found a total of 1,248 arachnid species currently or previously for sale. The list included some showstoppers, such as the enormous Asian forest scorpion and striped Costa Rican zebra tarantula. But it also had some surprises, like Daddy longlegs spiders, common denizens of basements across America.

“They are literally balls with legs — small balls with legs,” said Caroline Fukushima, a postdoctoral researcher at the Finnish Museum of Natural History and an author of the paper. “You cannot impress someone with that.”

Compared with the expansive online listings, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service trade database included only 267 arachnid species, the scientists found. The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, or CITES, which regulates the international trade of a variety of plant and animal species, had just 30 species in its trade database.

(Individual nations may have their own regulations, and American authorities do sometimes intercept arachnids that arrive without the proper paperwork. Dr. Danielson-Francois was once the recipient of a box full of seized emperor scorpions that officials were seeking to unload.)

The online marketplace moves fast, with new arachnid species appearing in shops not long after they are first described by scientists. Nearly 200 of the species that have been discovered since 2000 are already being traded; dozens were available within a year or two of first being described, the researchers found.

“That suggests that people are going out to the field, and they’re finding something new and just collecting the heck out of it and then putting it up online for sale,” Dr. Danielson-Francois said.

Collectors may also be buying species that aren’t yet known to science. Dr. Hughes and her colleagues identified about 100 kinds of arachnids in trade that were consistently described as variants of known species, such as the “Vietnam blue tarantula.” (“Not for beginners,” the site Reptile Rapture cautions. “Very Defensive.”) But in many cases, these “variants” may actually be distinct new species, the scientists said.

In a separate analysis of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife records, the researchers found that about two-thirds of individual arachnids had been caught in the wild. Many were shipped from countries where they are not known to be native, suggesting that they may have been laundered across national borders, Dr. Hughes said.

The study has limitations. It is not an exhaustive inventory of every arachnid species available for purchase, and not all online listings may translate into actual sales, outside experts cautioned.

And the ecological effects of this trade are difficult to determine, in part because so little is known about arachnids. “We often don’t really fully understand the distributions of many of these species, let alone specifically where they occur, what they need to survive,” said Sarina Jepsen, who directs the endangered species program at the Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation, an international nonprofit.

But many arachnid species appear to be confined to small geographic regions; some, like tarantulas, mature slowly and have long life spans. “You can think of them as the rhinoceros or the panda of the arachnid world,” Dr. Danielson-Francois said. “It’s possible for local populations to go extinct when they’re poached.”

In another recent study, researchers at Cornell University found multiple species of endangered tarantulas being sold online.

	<p>Protecting arachnids will require more of everything, experts said: more regulation, more research on arachnid ecology and more data on precisely which species are being imported to and exported from specific countries — and in what quantities.</p> <p>“Are there species that we should be particularly concerned about?” Dr. Cooper said. “Are there species that are hammered in large numbers every year? Every species is not equivalent.”</p> <p>In the meantime, experts encouraged arachnid enthusiasts to do their homework before acquiring new organisms, making sure they know where the animals come from and whether they were captive-bred or wild-caught.</p> <p>“We have to, as final consumers, think about what is our role in helping conservation of these animals that we love so much,” Dr. Fukushima said.</p>
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HEADLINE	05/19 Auburn gas station \$10 pump: racing fuel
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/money/auburn-gas-station-10-dollar-fuel-prices/281-fb2e04e6-1501-4a8c-8ef2-e6553cd0a08f
GIST	<p>AUBURN, Wash. — When an independent, family-owned gas station in Auburn added digits to pricing signs at its pumps, Small and Sons Operations Manager Jeff Small said it had no intention of sparking viral national headlines about Washington gas stations expecting \$10-a-gallon gas prices.</p> <p>"We have a specialty grade of fuel here and that's why we had to change the digits at the dispenser," Small said. "Now we've got all this attention, good or bad, and I'm getting tons of calls, all day, every day right now, and it's frustrating."</p> <p>Small said the gas station is located near a race track and sells racing fuel that costs significantly more than regular gas. Prices for the fuel, like all gas prices, have been rising. Without enough digits to price it at \$10 or to include tenths of pricing, the station was missing out on money.</p> <p>"We've been trying to find a way to get it above ten dollars for a while now, we've kind of been losing money on it, because gas pumps, hardware, software, take time to reload, and offer those digits," Small said.</p> <p>About a week after updating its pumps, it was contacted by a website asking about the change, with a headline citing gas stations "[adding] extra digit in anticipation of \$10 dollar prices" and a description reading, "A spokesperson at 76 confirmed to The Post Millennial that the gas pumps were reprogrammed to allocate for double-digit pricing."</p> <p>Small said he is not a spokesperson for the 76 company. He said he did speak with a reporter, emphasizing the racing fuel reasoning. The story did mention the race fuel reasoning several paragraphs in, saying "this specific gas station also sells race fuel which may have forced the reprogramming since it has also increased in pricing."</p> <p>But the "\$10-a-gallon" headline was picked up by other websites and social media pages, and Small said he began receiving nonstop calls asking for comment on his "prediction" that fuel prices would be rising significantly in the near future.</p> <p>"It was pretty crazy, cause I told somebody over the phone exactly what I've told you, and to wake up and see the article completely spun in a different direction is really frustrating," Small said. "If this was a whole industry thing, we wouldn't be the only station in America with the digit switch ... that's what I've been trying to tell people. There's no insight here, just race fuel."</p> <p>As for the assertion of gas shortages across the state, KING 5 reached out to several companies and a petroleum association, but could not confirm any type of widespread shortage. A spokesperson for the</p>

Western States Petroleum Association said it also had not heard about a shortage, though it is possible some individual stations ran out of gas, like people reported via social media.

Tracking how information spreads

The University of Washington [Center for an Informed Public](#) works to study misinformation, promote an informed society and strengthen democratic discourse. Research scientist Mike Caulfield said an incentive for speed in reposting information has fueled the growth of viral stories that may or may not get the full picture.

"This is a pattern we see a lot," Caulfield said. "The way this one seems to have worked is there was a specific reason something was the case - in this case, the price of racing fuel - that is outside the expertise of almost anybody looking at it. Most people looking at it, that's not going to occur to them because they're not an expert at it but when people see the photo, and when they see the extra digit, they feel this is something they can intuitively understand."

In working to grab attention - and the response and interactions that can come with it - a nugget of information may become the headline, as was the case in this scenario, without providing the proper caveats, Caulfield said.

"A lot of times we see something that isn't necessarily entirely wrong but it's been miscontextualized, a crucial piece of context has been removed," Caulfield said. "The point is, whether it's due to a misunderstanding, or whether it's due to people just being overeager and not caring, whether it's due to someone trying to make a buck- at the point it reaches you, you have to see your role here as trying to make the information space a little bit better, and you do that again because you care that the information you give people is half-decent."

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HEADLINE	05/19 Monkeypox a serious problem?
SOURCE	https://www.thedailybeast.com/monkeypox-could-be-a-serious-problem-thanks-to-this-twist?ref=home
GIST	<p>Even as the coronavirus pandemic continues to kill hundreds of Americans a day, monkeypox, a viral disease that can cause serious flu-like symptoms and a distinctive and unsightly crop of papules all over the patient's face and body, has arrived. The first case of monkeypox in the U.S. this year came with a man in Massachusetts who was recently in Canada, and New York City was investigating a possible case on Thursday.</p> <p>So far, that's not cause for alarm. While it is endemic to—or traditionally found in—West Africa, this is certainly not the virus' first visit to American shores, even since the COVID-19 crisis began. And it is by no means a new virus. However, if monkeypox is now spreading fairly easily from person-to-person, as some early evidence suggests may be the case, that would be an unwelcome twist.</p> <p>"Previous exportations of this disease rarely resulted in any person-to-person transmission," said Henry Wu, an associate professor in the infectious-disease program at Emory University School of Medicine focused on travel medicine. "I think clearly there is local transmission occurring in these non-endemic areas, at a number we've never seen before in previous outbreaks."</p> <p>Conventional public health wisdom about monkeypox holds that it spreads via close contact, such as skin-to-skin touching, or the touching of lesions. But the WHO cites a broader array of potential dangers like "body fluids, respiratory droplets, and contaminated materials such as bedding." Past outbreaks in the U.S., like one in the midwest in 2003, have been linked to pet rodents imported from Africa. Meanwhile in Africa itself, experts frequently tie the disease to the hunting and consumption of "bushmeat," an umbrella term for wild animals like monkeys, rodents, and bats.</p> <p>The virus, a relative of smallpox and chickenpox, cropped up last year in Texas and Maryland among people who had recently been to Nigeria. This time, it may have followed a more circuitous route to the United States, possibly including a detour through Europe and elsewhere in North America. Seeing five</p>

[cases in Portugal and 23 in Spain](#), as well as an accompanying [flare-up in the U.K.](#) and [possible cases in Canada](#), all in a matter of weeks, is, to put it mildly, not the usual pattern, experts said.

“Monkeypox is endemic in West Africa, especially in Nigeria,” and the virus “probably has an animal reservoir, but we do not know which animal,” Eskild Petersen, a professor emeritus of infectious diseases at Aarhus University, Denmark, told The Daily Beast.

“The current outbreak is a surprise,” added Petersen, who chairs the European Society for Clinical Microbiology and Infectious Diseases (ESCMID) Emerging Infections Task Force.

One key difference between this virus and the one that causes COVID-19 is who might have the most to fear from it, experts said. Specifically, younger people and men who have sex with men may be at higher risk in places like the United States, even as COVID-19 has disproportionately killed the elderly.

“Vaccination against smallpox is quite protective, so those like me old enough to have had a smallpox vaccine are well protected,” Carlos Del Rio, professor of medicine in the division of infectious diseases at Emory University School of Medicine, told The Daily Beast. “It is young people who have not received smallpox vaccine who are at risk.”

What’s more, Wu said, when it comes to assessing this new outbreak, “certain assumptions about things that are novel, or effects that we’re less familiar with, may not fit our usual paradigms of infection control.”

“We should assume with any infectious pathogen, the more it spreads among humans, there can always be a possibility of mutations leading to adaptations that facilitate spread,” Wu explained. “Obviously we’re not the usual host. So it’s not adapted, typically, to infect us, but the more it spreads to humans, the more it can adapt.”

In other words, while no evidence exists yet pointing to an unusual amount of spread through respiration, with COVID still killing in large numbers, experts aren’t eager to make any comforting assumptions about how a virus that can be lethal finds new hosts.

“I do not want to be alarmist, but we have to be careful with a virus that is spreading by the respiratory route, like COVID,” Petersen said. “It is a respiratory infection, but previously we did not think that it was very contagious. This perhaps should be reconsidered now.”

The CDC, for its part, does [caution Americans in detail about respiratory spread of monkeypox](#) on its website.

Perhaps the most troubling wrinkle: According to a [statement from the U.K. Health Security Agency](#), the disease is appearing “predominantly in gay, bisexual, or men who have sex with men.” The statement notes that while monkeypox is not regarded as a sexually transmitted infection, “it can be passed on by direct contact during sex.”

If monkeypox sees widespread infections in the U.S., either from sex or from respiration, that would be a significant change from the days when people were thought to have picked up the virus from rodent bedding, or yes, [by eating wild monkeys](#). What’s worse, according to Petersen, “it is an infection that is more serious in immunocompromised people like [those who are] HIV-infected.”

But since, unlike COVID, this is not a novel virus, prevention is not a mysterious black box. The smallpox vaccine works on monkeypox, though it’s known to cause rather intense side effects, and [always leaves a permanent scar](#). A second vaccine has previously been licensed for both smallpox and monkeypox, and, [according to Bloomberg](#), the feds made a \$119 million move to prep more doses of it this week. Antivirals that can help with smallpox infections [can also be used against monkeypox](#), according to the CDC.

	<p>And in an intriguing bit of professional speculation from Petersen, the public-health backstop that may ultimately prevent a widespread monkeypox outbreak for younger people could be the immunity many carry around thanks to the already-administered chickenpox vaccine.</p> <p>Or previously having had chickenpox.</p> <p>“The key determinant will probably be if infection or vaccination against chickenpox provide some cross immunity against monkeypox. We do not know that. If not, we have a new virus in a non-immune population: those under 40,” Petersen said.</p> <p>However, it remains far too early to start panicking about some kind of dual pandemic catastrophe.</p> <p>“I think the outbreak will be contained,” Del Rio said.</p>
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HEADLINE	05/19 Ballot fiasco delays results in Oregon
SOURCE	https://www.seattlepi.com/news/article/Ballot-fiasco-delays-results-in-Oregon-17185384.php
GIST	<p>OREGON CITY, Ore. (AP) — Thousands of ballots with blurry barcodes that can’t be read by vote-counting machines will delay results by weeks in a key U.S. House race in Oregon’s primary election, a shocking development that is giving a black eye to a vote-by-mail pioneer state with a national reputation as a leader on voter access and equity.</p> <p>The fiasco affects up to 60,000 ballots, or two-thirds of the roughly 90,000 returned so far in Oregon’s third-largest county. Hundreds of ballots were still coming in under a new law that allows them to be counted as long as they are postmarked by Election Day, and 200 Clackamas County employees were getting a crash course Thursday in vote-counting after being redeployed to address the crisis.</p> <p>Elections workers must pull the faulty ballots from batches of 125, transfer the voter's intent to a fresh ballot, then double-check their entries — a painstaking process that could draw the election out until June 13, when Oregon certifies its vote. The workers operate in pairs, one Democrat and one Republican, in two shifts of 11 hours a day.</p> <p>Voters from both political parties milled about in a narrow room with windows that allowed views of workers opening ballots, transferring votes, reviewing flagged ballots and using the vote-counting machines. They expressed shock at the error and anger at the slow reaction by embattled Elections Clerk Sherry Hall, who has held the elected post for nearly 20 years. By Wednesday night, workers had counted 15,649.</p> <p>“It blows my mind,” Ron Smith, a Clackamas County voter, said. “It’s a little bit questionable. That’s why I’m here. ... With all that’s going on, we don’t need extra suspicion. It seems like something like that would have been tested correctly at the beginning of this whole entire process.”</p> <p>The debacle has stunned Oregon, where all ballots have been cast only by mail for 23 years and lawmakers have consistently pushed to expand voter access through automatic voter registration, expanded deadlines and other measures. It's also thrown into question a key U.S. House race in a redrawn district that includes a large portion of Clackamas County, which stretches nearly 2,000 square miles (5,180 square kilometers), from Portland’s liberal southern suburbs to rural conservative communities on the flanks of Mount Hood.</p> <p>In the Democratic primary for Oregon's 5th Congressional District, seven-term Rep. Kurt Schrader, a moderate, was trailing in the vote behind progressive challenger Jamie McLeod-Skinner. The outcome could have an outsized impact in November, with the possibility that voters could flip the seat for the GOP.</p>

Hall said the problem came to light May 3, when workers put the first ballots returned through the vote-counting machine. About 70 or 80 ballots from each batch of 125 were spit out as unreadable because their barcodes were more faint and slightly blurred. It was too late to print and mail new ballots, she said.

As Election Day approached and ballots stacked up, Hall said she allowed elections workers to take the weekend off because just three people signed up to work Saturday or Sunday. "We have people mostly between the ages of 70 and 85" and they need rest, she said.

The secretary of state's office said Hall declined help, saying Clackamas County could handle the situation. Hall told The Associated Press several county workers were assigned to the ballot problem May 11, a week after it surfaced.

Kathy Selvaggio, who lives in the county's more urban and affluent suburbs, peered through the windows Thursday to watch the vote tally.

"Mail-in voting works, it works well here, but it does undermine my faith in (Hall)," said Selvaggio, who was there as a volunteer for the McLeod-Skinner campaign.

Hall said her department has discussed running test ballots from the printer before they were mailed out, but that her office had used the printer in question for 10 years with no issues.

"There's lots of other tasks to do," Hall, who is up for reelection in November, told AP. "I hate the fact that this happened with our ballots. It's horrible. We need to be building trust with voters and this is not a trustworthy piece, but we are doing what we can."

It's not the first time Hall has come under fire in her elections role. In 2012, a temporary election worker was sentenced to 90 days in jail after admitting she tampered with two ballots. In 2014, Hall was criticized for using the phrase "Democrat Party" — a pejorative used by Republicans to demean Democrats — on a primary ballot instead of Democratic Party.

Oregon Secretary of State Shemia Fagan said she is "deeply concerned" by the most recent situation and her office issued a statement Tuesday calling the delay "unacceptable." But state elections officials said Thursday that they had little authority over local county elections officials.

"The independence of county clerks is an important part of the electoral system and for now we are focused on supporting them," said agency spokesman Ben Morris.

State law does not require county elections officials to run proof ballots through their machines before mailing them.

Christopher Stout, an associate professor of political science at Oregon State University, said he wouldn't be surprised to see legislation to change that.

"I think all of these problems, of course, are bad in the short term," he said. "But in the long term, they'll lead to improvements, because people will see that those things are problems and they'll find ways to make it better."

Former Oregon House Minority Leader Christine Drazan was closely watching results trickle in from across the state Tuesday night. She was eventually declared the winner in the GOP gubernatorial primary the next night.

"I had understood going into election night that Clackamas County knew that this was a challenge," Drazan said. "So the fact that we were not quite there on election night was just a fact that we had to accept and learn more about how the county was going to respond to that."

She said voters concerned about the integrity of the process should come watch it in person.

	“It should have been addressed earlier with this level of urgency, but it’s pretty rare to have a printing problem like this,” Drazan said.
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Crime, Criminals

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HEADLINE	05/20 Louisiana high school graduation; 4 shot
SOURCE	https://www.foxnews.com/us/louisiana-high-school-shooting-graduation
GIST	<p>Four people were injured in a shooting following a high school graduation in Louisiana Thursday night, according to police.</p> <p>The graduation ceremony was being held at Southeastern Louisiana State University in Hammond, Louisiana. Police said the shooting happened as Hammond High School students and their family members started to leave SLSU's University Center around 8 p.m. local time.</p> <p>Video obtained by Fox News showed people running and screaming near the area where the shooting took place.</p> <p>Hammond police said they do not believe any students were involved in the shooting. Hammond Police Chief Edwin Bergeron said all four people that were injured had non-life threatening injuries.</p> <p>Police said one suspect was taken into custody.</p>
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HEADLINE	05/20 Norway: 3 injured; ‘random’ stabbing attack
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/world/norway-at-least-3-injured-in-random-stabbing-attack/
GIST	<p>COPENHAGEN, Denmark (AP) — A person with a knife wounded at least three people — one of them critically — in a random attack in a village near Norway’s capital, police said Friday.</p> <p>The perpetrator has been arrested, police said, adding that they received the alert at 8.48 a.m.</p> <p>The incident took place in Nore, a village in the Numedal valley not far from Oslo. Norwegian broadcaster TV2 said several ambulances, including air ambulances, were at the site, plus numerous police vehicles.</p> <p>It was not immediately clear where in the village the attack took place. The Numedal school confirmed the incident on its website and said that its crisis management team was assisting the police and following up with the school’s students and staff.</p> <p>William Scott, who was in the area delivering goods, told the VG newspaper he saw an injured woman lying on the ground.</p> <p>“At first I thought it was a collision because there was a large pool of blood on the ground,” he said.</p> <p>TV2 cited a witness saying bleeding victims came running from behind a convenience store. Pools of blood were seen on the asphalt, TV2 said.</p> <p>The village which is surrounded by mountains, sits 80 kilometers (50 miles) north of Kongsberg, where five people were fatally stabbed and four wounded in October when Espen Andersen Bråthen attacked strangers with a bow and arrows and knives.</p> <p>Andersen Bråthen pleaded guilty at the start of his trial Wednesday. He also faces 11 counts of attempted murder for the attack in Kongsberg, a former mining town of 26,000 people.</p>

HEADLINE	05/20 Chicago: 2 dead, 8 wounded in shooting
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/nation/police-1-dead-4-wounded-in-chicago-shooting/
GIST	<p>CHICAGO (AP) — Two people are dead and another eight wounded following a shooting near a fast food restaurant in Chicago that sent bystanders scattering, authorities said.</p> <p>The shooting happened about 10:40 p.m. Thursday near a McDonald's on the city's Near North Side, a few blocks from the city's Magnificent Mile shopping district. One person was taken into custody and a weapon was recovered, police said in statement.</p> <p>Details about what led to the shooting weren't immediately released by police, but a witness, Deonna Jackson, 18, said the shooting appeared to stem from a fight outside the restaurant.</p> <p>"When the fight first started, we were right next to them," Deonna Jackson, 18, told the Chicago Sun-Times. "We had to run because I didn't want anyone to swing on me."</p> <p>The shooting comes amid a surge in deadly violence in the city in recent years. And it follows a deadly shooting last weekend in downtown Chicago's Millennium Park that killed a teen and led the city to tighten a curfew for young people as part of efforts to curb violence.</p> <p>As paramedics and officers responded Thursday, a fight erupted between two people across the street from the scene of the shooting, the Chicago Tribune reported, and some people crossed a line of police tape and argued with officers before they were moved away.</p> <p>Police didn't immediately release the names or ages of the dead. Additional details about the circumstances of the shooting weren't immediately released. An investigation was ongoing.</p>
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HEADLINE	05/19 Emerging cocaine trafficking routes
SOURCE	https://www.hstoday.us/featured/column-emerging-cocaine-trafficking-routes-between-latin-america-and-middle-east-fuel-drug-trade-expansion/
GIST	<p>Latin American drug cartels have inundated the United States with tons of cocaine since the late 1970s and during that time have expanded their market to include countries of the European Union. Since their involvement in this trade, cartels have responded to the counter-drug-trafficking policies either by changing their modus operandi or transit routes; however, their appetite for transferring more and more cocaine and increasing their profits has never waned. The cartels' resourcefulness has enabled them to adapt easily to new environments. That resourcefulness includes using the power of money to bribe corrupt officials and expand their networks in the United States, Europe, Asia, Africa and, most recently, the Middle East.</p> <p>A U.N. assessment of world drug-market trends for cocaine and amphetamine-type stimulants found that close to a half million people died from illicit drug use in 2019 and that around 1,400 metric tons (MT) of cocaine, intended for around 20 million cocaine users, were seized by authorities. About 900 MT of the total were seized in Latin American and Central American countries, followed by 300 MT in the United States and 100 MT in Europe. Colombia alone accounted for 34 percent of world cocaine seizures, followed by the United States at 18 percent, Brazil at 7 percent, Panama at 5 percent, and the Netherlands at 4 percent. Middle Eastern countries ranked low in terms of tonnage and percentage of world cocaine seizures, even though tons of cocaine have been transited through or were destined for locations in the region. The main traffickers are Hezbollah and the increasingly influential Sinaloa cartel, both of which typically use routes that lead to final destinations in Turkey and routes that pass through the country to destinations in Europe and elsewhere in the Middle East.</p> <p>It was not until the early 2000s that Turkey seized more than small amounts of cocaine of around several hundred kilograms, usually from African couriers who had stashed the drugs in their bodies. Turkey since</p>

then has [recorded](#) an increasing number of cocaine seizures each year, including almost 2 MT in 2020 (see Figure 1). According to a [2021 drugs report](#) from the Turkish Ministry of the Interior, Turkey conducted more than 4,000 cocaine seizure operations between 2018 and 2020. The report noted that the uptick in the number of seizures indicates the potential for increased cocaine activity in the country.

Turkey invariably has been a source, transit, and destination country for drug trafficking. Opium cultivation and [Turkey's increasing role](#) as a source country in the 1970s created tense relations between Turkey and the United States. When opium cultivation moved from the Golden Triangle countries – Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand – to Afghanistan in the 1970s, new heroin trafficking routes began to emerge in the Middle East. Turkish drug-trafficking groups with their partners in Iran and the Balkans countries were quick to start new trafficking routes. Well-known drug kingpins Huseyin Baybashin, Orfi Cetinkaya, and Hursit Yavas became the targets of European police in the 1980s and 1990s. Since the 2000s, Turkish groups have dominated the heroin market in Europe. These groups also have been involved in the [trafficking of other drugs](#), such as Ecstasy and Captagon in the Gulf States and methamphetamine in Asia.

The [government's response](#) to the drug-trafficking activity has varied over the years, depending on how close or far away it was from operating as a democratic system of government. When Turkey was a fledgling democracy in the 1980s and 1990s, corruption was an endemic and Turkey's stance against drug-trafficking groups was inconsistent. At times that stance was serious, while at other times it was less robust. When Turkey began the process of applying to join the European Union in the early 2000s, Turkish officials strengthened the country's democratic system and focused their efforts on curbing corruption. Turkish police performed superbly as a key player in these anticorruption activities. This period lasted until the early 2010s and was marked by a record number of drug seizures. The European Union and the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency cooperated effectively with Turkey, engaging in joint controlled-delivery operations. The number of government officials involved in corruption and then charged with complicity in drug trafficking was no more than several tens of police officers during this entire period. Starting in the early 2010s, the situation changed dramatically. The government morphed into an authoritarian state and adopted a more kleptocratic system of government. Turkey's performance against drug trafficking deteriorated considerably. The country now lacks the capacity to counter drug-trafficking groups. It has instead become a source and destination country for methamphetamine and a transit and destination country for cocaine trade, and it has networked with Mexican drug cartels.

Who Is Involved in the Cocaine Trade?

Countries typically develop one of [three types](#) of relationships with drug-trafficking organizations: collusive, tolerant, and confrontational. Countries that have a collusive relationship are actively involved in drug trafficking. Countries that have a tolerant relationship accept bribes from drug traffickers and turn a blind eye to the illicit activity. Countries with a confrontational relationship are concerned about protecting the sovereignty of the state from drug-trafficking groups that control a portion of the country's territory and will use force to eliminate the groups' territorial control. The Mexican government's war-like response to drug cartels in the country is an example of a confrontational relationship with drug-trafficking groups.

Drug-trafficking groups in Turkey have either a collusive or tolerant relationship with the government. Convicted mafia boss Sedat Peker, for example, claimed in a May 2021 [video post](#) that Erkam Yildirim, the son of then-Prime Minister Binali Yildirim, was involved in drug trades between Turkey and Venezuela. Peker further claims that after the seizure of 4.9 MT of cocaine in Colombia in June 2020, Erkam Yildirim visited Caracas twice in 2021 – once in January and again in February – to move cocaine networks from Colombia to Venezuela where the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration office has no control. Moreover, rumors indicate that politicians and high-level bureaucrats in the Turkish government have formed domestic heroin-trafficking organizations. Statements from an increasing number of police officers, judges, prosecutors, and state officials since the early 2010s also indicate that state officials not only have colluded with drug traffickers but also been actively involved in ongoing drug-trade activities. As a result of the Turkish government's tolerant counter-drug policies, Turkish transnational drug trafficking groups have seized the opportunity for further involvement in the drug trade and the chance to sell, and are eager

to expand the types of drugs they can offer including cocaine, heroin, methamphetamine, Ecstasy, and Captagon.

Turkish cocaine-trafficking groups have networked with Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Sinaloa Cartel in Mexico, and Sito Miñanco in Spain as well as the drug cartels in Colombia, Panama, and Brazil. On several occasions, Turkish police seized shipments of cocaine that had been transferred by Hezbollah from Lebanon to Turkey. It should be noted that Hezbollah launders money in Turkish state banks. The Sinaloa Cartel is actively involved in transporting cocaine both to and through Turkey. The relationship between the Sinaloa Cartel and Turkish trafficking groups began in the early 2010s when the cartel hired Turkish chemists to produce drugs. Turkish cocaine traffickers networked extensively with the Galician drug smuggler [Sito Miñanco](#) until Miñanco was [arrested](#) in February 2018 in Algeciras, Spain, and sent to prison for allegedly being the leader of a plot that distributed cocaine to Italy, Albania, and the Netherlands. Turkish traffickers subsequently expanded their cocaine networks and their influence in countries bordering the Atlantic Ocean, such as those in Central America.

Ongoing Middle East Latin America Drug-Trafficking Networks

Drug seizures in Turkey, Spain, and Latin America as well as the arrests of Turkish drug traffickers continue to be indicators of active drug-trafficking networks involving groups in the Middle East and Latin America. [For example](#), in 2017, Paraguay arrested two Turkish citizens, Münir Öztürk and Eray Üç, for cocaine trafficking. Both men, who also are members of Hezbollah, were charged with transferring cocaine to the Middle East and sent to prison; however, they escaped from the prison after 10 months. [In 2018](#), Venezuelan prosecutors targeted a cocaine-trafficking group led by Turkish-Venezuelan trafficker Ozer Murat for allegedly transferring cocaine from Venezuela to Paris, Istanbul, and Beirut. In 2020, Colombian police seized [4.9 MT of cocaine](#) in the port of Buenaventura. Investigators discovered that the cocaine was destined for Turkey. Also in 2020, Panamanian police seized 1 MT of cocaine on a ship in the port of Cristobal and 500 kilograms on a cargo ship that entered the Panama Canal. Both vessels were destined for Turkey. In 2021, Turkish customs officials seized 1.3 MT of cocaine and 439 kilograms in two separate operations in one week at the port of Mersin. The drugs had been transferred from Ecuador. That same year, Spanish police arrested the crew of a Turkish ship that was transporting cocaine on a route through the Atlantic Ocean on its way to Spain. [Again in 2021](#), Brazilian police forced the landing of a Turkish jet that had taken off from a small airport in Ribeirao Preto and seized 1.3 MT of cocaine. It is [believed](#) that Sergio Roberto de Carvalho, referred to by some as a Brazilian Escobar, was one of the traffickers behind the operation. [In 2022](#), Spanish police seized 3 MT cocaine on a Turkish vessel and arrested four Turkish traffickers. Based on these seizures and arrests, it would not be wrong to say that Turkish traffickers have strong networks with Latin American traffickers.

Why Turkey and the Middle East?

Drug-trafficking groups, particularly those in Turkey and the Middle East, are resourceful and quick to adapt as circumstances change and new opportunities arise. The groups prefer to operate in areas where the risk of seizure is low, the presence of corruptible state officials is likely, and police and customs officials are willing to turn a blind eye toward illicit drug activity. These criteria explain, in part, why drug traffickers have chosen Turkey and the Middle East as an alternative to other land and sea routes to destinations worldwide. Other factors, however, are at play.

First, [heroin prices fell](#) after the Taliban took control of Afghanistan in August 2021. Finding itself in desperate need of funds in the wake of widespread economic sanctions imposed by several Western countries, the Taliban began supplying more heroin to traffickers in exchange for a portion of the profits. Some Turkish heroin-trafficking groups, in turn, have moved to cocaine trade because of its profitability.

Second, highly experienced and well-networked transnational Turkish groups in Europe networked with Mexican cartels to use Turkey as an alternative route for their own drug-trafficking operations. These cartels already dominated the heroin market and were active in human smuggling, human trafficking, and drug trafficking in Europe. They drew on their experiences in Europe and moved their networks to a new route that passes through Turkey. These cartels also have assigned traffickers to the ports of Antwerp and Rotterdam, where seizures of cocaine have reached record highs of [66 MT and 33 MT](#), respectively.

Third, an increase in U.S. and European operations against Mexican drug cartels has forced them to find less risky routes. Cartels that targeted the European cocaine market therefore began to use Turkey as an alternative through route.

Fourth, Turkey's fast transformation into an authoritarian and kleptocratic state created a favorable playing field for groups interested in joining any of the cocaine-trafficking networks in the country. The involvement of high-level politicians only made matters worse and pushed more state officials to get involved in the cocaine trade.

Fifth, the government's retaliatory attitude after the [December 17 and 25 corruption scandals](#) in 2013 that implicated President Erdogan, his cabinet, and his entourage and an equally harsh response to the [suspicious July 15, 2016, coup attempt](#) resulted in the firing of 40,000 police officers – including entire units of narcotics officers. Erdogan and his ministers did not care about the negative effects of these purges and instead prioritized safeguarding their high-level positions in the government.

Sixth, extensive corruption in the Turkish government has created opportunities for cocaine-trafficking groups. According to Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index, Turkey in [2012](#) had a score of 49 (on a scale ranging from 0 = very corrupt to 100 = very clean) and a rank of 54 (where higher rank means more corruption). By [2021](#), Turkey had a score of 38 and a rank of 96. As evidence of the increase in corruption, a number of military personnel, police, judges, prosecutors, customs officials, and government officials are known to have been involved in drug trafficking since the early 2010s.

Seventh, [Turkish companies](#) have made investments in Latin America, where the volume of exports has tremendously grown in the last 20 years. The Turkish company Yilport Holding, which was created in August 2011 to consolidate the country's port and container terminal operations in Latin America, now runs the port of Puerto Bolívar in Ecuador and the port of Paita in Peru. It may be no coincidence, of course, that cocaine recently has left from these ports and destined for Turkey.

Eighth, ongoing suspicious governmental relations between Turkey and Venezuela have increased the role of Turkey in Venezuelan government affairs. The close friendship between Erdogan and Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro, for example, led to ongoing illegal trading of gold and to cocaine trafficking between the two countries.

To conclude, recent autocratic and kleptocratic transformations in Turkey have created obstacles for effective investigations and international cooperation in countering the new cocaine networks that are now flourishing in the Middle East. Turkey's tepid response to numerous cocaine seizures in Spain and Latin America and destined to Turkey is far from satisfactory. The government turns a blind eye to the trafficking and makes no attempt to investigate any of the recent seizures of several metric tons of cocaine.

The failure to investigate is not surprising, given that the [son of Turkey's former prime minister](#) and the current politicians are active accomplices in cocaine-trafficking operations. Turkey has been reluctant to trace the source of the cocaine that enters the country and to cooperate with Latin American countries in their efforts to do so. European Union officials are appalled by the willingness of Turkish authorities to cooperate with transnational cocaine-trafficking groups. The United States' [2022 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report](#) underlined how Turkish officials did not accept invitations to collaborate on drug-related investigations. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that Latin American cocaine traffickers will continue to use Turkey as a passageway to other countries for the sale of illicit drugs and that Middle Eastern and European countries will continue to be targets for a seemingly endless supply of cocaine.

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HEADLINE	05/20 ICC team deploys to Ukraine: war crimes
SOURCE	https://www.hstoday.us/ukraine/international-criminal-court-team-deployed-to-ukraine-to-investigate-war-crimes/
GIST	The International Criminal Court (ICC) Prosecutor Karim A.A. Khan QC has announced the deployment of a forensics and investigative team to Ukraine.

The team of 42 investigators, forensic experts and support personnel will advance investigations into crimes falling into the jurisdiction of the ICC and provide support to Ukrainian national authorities. This represents the largest ever single field deployment by the Prosecutor's office since its establishment.

"I wish to express my sincere appreciation to the Government of the Netherlands whose strong cooperation in recent weeks has facilitated the secondment of a significant number of Dutch national experts to my Office in support of this mission," Khan said. "This collaboration will significantly enhance the impact of our forensic and investigative actions on the ground. In real terms, it will allow us to collect more testimonial accounts, support the identification of relevant forensic and digital materials and ensure that information and evidence is collected in a manner that strengthens its admissibility in future proceedings before the ICC."

The team will expand lead development and collect testimonial accounts relevant to military attacks that may constitute Rome Statute crimes. Through close cooperation with the Ukrainian authorities, ICC's forensic experts will map the existing action of national crime scene investigators in order to trace workflows and strengthen the chain of custody with respect to hard evidence.

"It is essential that the work of all actors seeking to support accountability efforts in Ukraine benefit from effective coordination and communication," Khan continued. "In doing so, we will significantly strengthen the impact of our collective work in establishing the truth. Reflecting this, the team deployed by my Office today will also engage with a team of French forensic experts on the ground in Ukraine in order to ensure continuity and continuation of their work with respect to the identification of remains, ballistics analysis and the storage and preservation of forensic evidence. We will also be engaging with teams deployed by other States in Ukraine in order to comprehensively map existing activities and strengthen coordination across all actors. It is my intention to ensure that this collaborative work is then continued through the consistent presence of my Office on the ground."

The Prosecutor confirmed that 21 States have now indicated their willingness to second national experts in support of the work, while 20 States have committed to provide financial contributions.

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HEADLINE	05/19 UCLA student pleads guilty Jan 6 riot role
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2022/05/19/far-right-ucla-student-who-sat-vps-chair-jan-6-pleads-guilty/
GIST	<p>A far-right Republican leader at UCLA with white supremacist ties pleaded guilty Thursday after admitting to sitting in Vice President Mike Pence's chair in the Senate during the Jan. 6 Capitol breach.</p> <p>Christian Secor, a member of America First Bruins, admitted to obstructing an official proceeding — namely Congress's certification of the election of Joe Biden — in a plea deal with U.S. prosecutors.</p> <p>The charge carries a maximum of up to 20 years in prison, but prosecutors and Secor's defense attorney agreed that he likely faces either 21 to 27 months or 53 to 61 months in prison under advisory federal guidelines, depending on whether he is deemed to have caused property damage or injury. He is scheduled to be sentenced Oct. 7.</p> <p>Prosecutors agreed to drop the rest of a 10-count indictment, including two felony counts of assaulting police and rioting, and not to bring a new charge of destroying digital evidence as threatened against the 23-year-old.</p> <p>"The defendant entered the Senate Floor at approximately 2:49 p.m. The defendant then made his way to the Senate Dais and sat in the seat that had been occupied by Vice President Mike Pence approximately 30 minutes earlier," prosecutors said in plea papers signed by Secor.</p>

While he and other rioters were present there and inside the Capitol, “the joint session to count and certify the votes of the Electoral College for the 2020 Presidential Election could not continue,” Secor acknowledged.

According to charging papers, Secor belonged to America First, a podcast group launched by Nicholas J. Fuentes, a far-right activist who joined the crowd outside the Capitol on Jan. 6 and organized a Nov. 11, 2020, rally in Michigan. The FBI affidavit identified Fuentes as a white supremacist and “public figure known for making racist statements and denying the Holocaust.” The affidavit said his followers are known as “Groypers.” Fuentes has not been charged. Fuentes has told The Washington Post that he isn’t a white supremacist and that he never denied the Holocaust.

The FBI said Secor described fascism as “epic” on Twitter; valorized the 2017 “Unite the Right” torch rally in Charlottesville during which marchers yelled anti-Semitic chants; and repeated anti-Semitic tropes suggesting Jewish influence over governments and “Westerners.”

At the Capitol, Secor carried a large blue “America First” flag, joined a group of rioters who entered the west side of the building at 2:26 p.m. through the broken Senate wing doors, and walked through the offices of Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), he admitted in plea papers. He then overwhelmed three police officers trying to bar the Columbus doors on the building’s east side, helping push it open at about 2:38 p.m., he admitted.

Earlier, Secor texted and tweeted his belief after the November 2020 election that “Trump will pull through by legal or illegal means,” and that if he did not, Republican governors should prepare secession papers, according to plea papers. He messaged another individual on the eve of the Capitol riots, “Wouldn’t be surprised if conservatives just storm the police and clobber antifa and the police but that’s wishful thinking,” he acknowledged.

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HEADLINE	05/19 Online chat before Buffalo shooting?
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/2022/05/19/payton-gendron-discord-buffalo-shootings/
GIST	<p>An online chatroom invitation sent shortly before the Buffalo supermarket shooting by alleged gunman Payton Gendron was accepted by 15 users, according to a person with knowledge of the messaging platform Discord’s investigation into the matter. When the 15 accepted the invite to that server, they were able to scroll back through months of Gendron’s voluminous writings and racist screeds.</p> <p>A copy of an invitation from Gendron reviewed by The Washington Post said Discord users who clicked through to the room also could view an online video stream, where footage of the Buffalo attack on Saturday was broadcast, raising the possibility more people saw the shootings as they happened than was previously known.</p> <p>Investigators at the messaging platform are sifting through data relating to Gendron’s account to decipher the accused shooter’s network, according to the person, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss matters also being examined by law enforcement.</p> <p>Discord has said it disabled Gendron’s chatroom after the shooting, which killed 10 people and injured three at a Tops supermarket, but has declined to say how it learned of the chat room’s connection to the attack.</p> <p>A Discord spokesperson declined to comment on the finding that 15 people accepted the invitation. The spokesperson referred The Post to a statement issued Wednesday that said the company was assisting law enforcement. “Hate has no place on Discord and we are committed to combating violence and extremism,” the spokesperson said.</p> <p>The new finding on Gendron’s alleged use of online networks to transmit footage of the killings, and to disseminate propaganda seeking to justify them, illustrates how social media companies have been unable to stop their platforms being exploited to spread terror despite promises to do so.</p>

Gendron, an 18-year-old from Conklin, N.Y., has pleaded not guilty to murder after being arrested at the scene of the killings. About half an hour before the shootings, according to Discord, Gendron's account shared an invitation with other users on the platform, which allows direct messaging and group discussion in private rooms known as servers that require an invite.

A copy of an invitation later posted online by one recipient features a link to Gendron's private Discord server, where he had for six months been compiling hundreds of postings that included racist screeds and explicit details of a plan for the shooting of Black people at the store in Buffalo. The messages were written by an author who identified himself as Gendron, a review by The Post found.

Gendron, a White man, cited a racist theory that non-Whites were brought to the United States to replace White people for political purposes. Eleven of the 13 people shot at the supermarket were Black, police have said.

It is unclear whether Discord can determine exactly what the 15 people did after they accepted the invitation to the private server, according to the person familiar with the matter. But their connection to the account could help law enforcement understand whether the accused shooter acted alone or was supported by online acquaintances.

The invitation, headed "Happening: This is not a drill," also included a separate link to an account on the video streaming service Twitch, where Gendron allegedly broadcast video of his attack from a camera mounted on his military-style helmet. Twitch screenshots shared online showed that 22 people watched and the firm has said it disabled the stream within two minutes of the first gunshot. But some viewers saved copies that have since spread online. (Twitch is owned by Amazon, whose founder, Jeff Bezos, owns The Post.)

It is not clear how much overlap there is between the 15 people on the Discord channel and the 22 previously known Twitch viewers. Users who saw Gendron's Discord invitation could have clicked through to the Twitch stream without joining his Discord server, or could have done both, the copy of the invitation shows.

The invitation said people could also view Gendron's video stream within his Discord server. One version of the attack video circulating online indicates that the viewer who saved it was watching a stream of Gendron's home computer screen, which was in turn displaying the live attack video. Gendron described plans for such a setup in writings before the attack. Viewers watching the video through that path may have been in addition to the 22 watching directly on Twitch.

Discord has declined to say how many people had access to Gendron's invitation. In his writings before the attack, he wrote that he intended to share it with everyone on his Discord friends list, each Discord server he belonged to and on message boards unrelated to Discord that feature extremist content. The invitation also included separate links to copies of his writings at file-sharing websites.

Created in 2015, Discord is a chat app that offers added features such as collaboration between groups using voice, video or screen sharing. Discord is divided into groups called servers and within servers there are channels. Servers can be public or made private, requiring an invitation to view the content.

New York Attorney General Letitia James said Wednesday that her office was investigating Discord, Twitch and other platforms in connection with the Buffalo shooting. A statement issued by her office said that it would examine online networks that the shooter used to amplify his attack.

"The fact that an individual can post detailed plans to commit such an act of hate without consequence, and then stream it for the world to see is bone-chilling and unfathomable," James said.

Instead of relying on advertisements, Discord offers premium memberships that users can pay for to enable advanced features. The business model means it collects less information than social media

companies on user activities and that Discord typically is not aware of how many views a particular piece of content received.

Nevertheless, law enforcement officials could use the company's metadata in conjunction with other information to try to decipher a person's identity, and anyone with connections to the shooter.

Charles Finfrock, who has conducted internal investigations at technology companies like Tesla and runs an investigations firm called Vigilance, said it is difficult to discern the true identity of a Discord user, but law enforcement officials may be able to use indicators like IP addresses, the types of computers used and whether individuals accessed the service via online or through a mobile app to elicit useful information in the ongoing criminal investigation.

"One of the first things you would do in a case like this is look at all his social media channels and messaging applications and try to identify like-minded people," he said.

Discord scans its service for indications of policy violations, according to the investigative procedures listed on the company website, but does not scan the content of private messages unless it is first alerted to violations, its policy says. Because Gendron was the only member of his private server until just before the shooting, according to Discord, other users could not see or flag troubling content he was posting there.

Discord previously has dealt with the use of its service to plan criminal activity. Organizers of the deadly "Unite the Right" rally in 2017 Charlottesville used Discord to plan the white supremacist rally that ended in violence.

That incident prompted the company to announce changes to its platform and that it would begin scanning the service for activity that might be illegal or violate the company's terms of service. Before Charlottesville, the "Trust and Safety" team at Discord consisted of one person, according to the company website. Now, that team makes up 15 percent of its 400 employees.

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HEADLINE	05/19 Sequim officer hurt, shots-fired traffic stop
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/sequim-officer-fires-weapon-during-traffic-stop/D3FH5H3N3VGWNEJCJVEUREJBGE/
GIST	<p>SEQUIM, Wash. — Law enforcement is investigating after a woman was found dead at a residence where a suspect lives and was arrested early Thursday during a traffic stop that led to shots being fired, injuring a Sequim officer.</p> <p>According to the Peninsula Daily News, Bret Allen Kenney, 34, was booked into jail as a person of interest in the homicide, as well as for first-degree assault of an officer, disarming an officer and DUI drugs.</p> <p>The homicide investigation followed what was a chaotic traffic stop in which the Sequim officer fired his weapon.</p> <p>At 4:31 a.m., the officer pulled over a vehicle near the intersection of West Washington Street and North Third Avenue. A Clallam County Sheriff's deputy arrived to assist six minutes later.</p> <p>At some point, the traffic stop escalated and became physical, according to Sequim City Attorney Kristina Nelson-Gross. That's when the Sequim officer fired his police weapon.</p> <p>Both the officer and the suspect were hurt. The officer had minor to moderate injuries and was evaluated at the hospital and released. The suspect was taken into custody and then evaluated at the hospital before being released to police.</p>

	<p>KIRO 7 later found out from the Kitsap Critical Incident Response Team, which is made up of a multi-agency investigative team of 10 law enforcement agencies from Kitsap, Mason, and Clallam counties, that at 8:40 a.m., Port Angeles officers received a request to conduct a welfare check for a woman at a residence in the 100 block of Senz Road.</p> <p>When officers arrived, they found a woman dead inside the home.</p> <p>Investigators learned the suspect involved in the shooting lived there.</p> <p>Who the woman is and how she died are unclear.</p> <p>KCIRT is investigating the shooting and the homicide tied to the suspect.</p>
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HEADLINE	05/19 Ex-district official stole taxpayer money
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/investigations/former-king-county-drainage-district-commissioner-wife-guilty/281-c7faf7c2-e50e-4024-bbe6-6068bb754d21
GIST	<p>ENUMCLAW, Wash — A former elected commissioner of King County Drainage District No. 5 was found guilty of stealing district taxpayer money.</p> <p>Allan “Benny” Thomas and his wife JoAnn faced 15 federal charges including conspiracy and money laundering.</p> <p>Allan “Benny” Thomas, who previously denied that he used more than \$450,000 in tax money collected by the public district to pay expenses for his Enumclaw dairy farm, was found guilty on 10 of 15 charges, including conspiracy, four counts each of wire and mail fraud, and one county of aggravated identity theft.</p> <p>His wife, JoAnn, was found guilty on all 15 counts, including a second count of aggravated identity theft and four counts of money laundering.</p> <p>Thomas was the longtime, elected commissioner of King County Drainage District No. 5 near Enumclaw and was responsible for maintaining nearly 20 miles of open trenches that provide drainage to the farmland outside the city.</p> <p>Records show that various public agencies were tipped that Thomas may have been misappropriating the \$70,000 to \$80,000 per year in taxes that the drainage district collects from landowners to clean the open trenches and keep stormwater flowing. But none took action beyond a vague warning.</p> <p>In 2019, the KING 5 Investigators reported on records that showed that Thomas and his wife created a fictitious company that he claimed was a contractor that was billing for the trench work. In fact, the company’s address was the home of Thomas’s mother-in-law.</p> <p>Records showed that, after Thomas was questioned about the billing irregularities, he set up a scheme to submit fake invoices from a friend’s company. That company continued to bill the county until KING 5 aired its investigation in 2019.</p> <p>A state audit after KING 5’s story showed that the couple diverted more than \$468,000 in tax money collected over eight years to pay for operations on their private dairy farm. The audit revealed the Thomas’ spent the money on hay, equipment, and farm services.</p> <p>Thomas and his wife pleaded “not guilty.” Their trial was delayed repeatedly because of pandemic shutdowns and illness of the couple and their defense lawyers.</p>

[Earlier this week, the Thomas' testified.](#) Allan Thomas said district records seized by the FBI did not accurately reflect how tax money collected since 2012 was spent. Allan Thomas said the records are not clear and that "...for farmer level (bookkeeping) we do pretty good. For professional level, not so good."

The defense claimed the City of Enumclaw bolstered suspicions that Thomas and his wife, JoAnn, were stealing tax money because the city wanted to acquire the Thomas's 155-acre dairy farm for residential development.

JoAnn Thomas also testified that government evidence does not accurately reflect where the \$70,000-\$80,000 the drainage district collected per year from taxpaying landowners was spent.

"I'm a really lousy bookkeeper," she said to the jury.

Assistant US Attorneys Andrew Friedman and Justin Arnold have told jurors that the Thomas's created a shell contracting company that claimed it was cleaning and maintaining the 20 or so miles of stormwater trenches in Drainage District No. 5. That company billed King County government for the supposed work, with commissioner Thomas signing off on the job.

The federal government said the Thomas's actually collected the money paid to the fictitious company and deposited it in their personal bank account to pay for expenses on their dairy farm.

The couple claimed their son, Alex Thomas, owned and operated the contracting company legitimately and that he was paid for clearing ditches. But Alex Thomas testified last week that he only cleaned ditches once or twice in 2012 and has not had any involvement with the company since.

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HEADLINE	05/19 Tukwila police crackdown on shoplifters
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/tukwila-police-see-positive-results-from-emphasis-patrols-cracking-down-on-shoplifting-drug-use
GIST	<p>TUKWILA, Wash. - It's the kind of tourism that no community wants—out-of-towners coming to a south King County city to do one thing: shoplift.</p> <p>Tukwila Police Department said thieves ransacking local stores is the top crime officers are responding to lately. Now, they are conducting emphasis patrols to deter would-be criminals.</p> <p>The department said the targeted area is near Andover Park West, between Tukwila Parkway and Strander Boulevard. The surrounding businesses include Southcenter Mall, Target and local shops. The thieves, who police said are not Tukwila residents, come to the area to do drugs, steal merchandise and then resell it on the streets for cash.</p> <p>"It's every single day they're walking out with bags and bags. They just come in and fill it up and walk out," said Amanda Stempniak, a manager at Dollar Tree. "We have quite a few violent ones. Our actual store manager was punched in the face about a week ago or so, all because she was asking him to leave and trying to get the merchandise back."</p> <p>Tukwila Police Department says they are cracking down on the issue. For several weeks, officers have been conducting emphasis patrols to catch and arrest multiple crooks, including some with active warrants. The department also installed cameras in parking lots at stores like Target to monitor shoplifters.</p> <p>Police said they have recovered thousands of dollars of stolen merchandise—from hard alcohol, to televisions, laundry detergent and clothing. Police also recovered guns, ammunition and drugs like fentanyl, meth and oxycodone intended to be used or distributed.</p>

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